

Comes a Pale Rider

by Gizmo

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Summary: Ethan Rayne steals a book. And it's owner comes a visiting...

Comes a Pale Rider

> Comes a Pale Rider.<br>

> By John Macamhlaidh<br>

><br>Disclaimers: I don't own Buffy or any of the characters from that series. I wish I did because then I would be very rich. The people who do own them are Joss Whedon et al.

><br>This story is set just before 'Doppelganger' in the second series.

><br>

>Enjoy.<br>

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><br>It wasn't too long after sundown when the RV managed to pull into the gas station on the outskirts of Sunnydale. With a final shudder the massive vehicle and it's trailer came to a stop beside one of the many empty pumps. The attendant looked up from his book to give the vehicle a once over as the engine was cut. He gave it another glance as he recognised the customisation. All windows but for the front windscreen were tinted and the body of the RV seemed to be heavier than the usual standard aluminium. Moving slightly in the swivel chair the attendant, Steve by his nametag, tried to get a glimpse of the driver but only caught a blur as the person got up to get out.

> <br> The diver stepped out of the main door on the side of the RV and Steve shot out of his seat in surprise. The driver was all of five feet six inches tall and nothing but stunning. Her flame red hair was offset by the palest blue eyes he had ever seen and the smile she gave him as she saw his booth caused him to fall back into his chair. She all but floated over to the booth and rested her elbows on the edge of the booth. Pale faced he leaned forward.

><br> "Can I help you Miss?"

><br> "Sure. Could you give us directions to Sandal Street, please?"

><br> Steve looked up and behind the girl as she said us and caught a glimpse of a man coming out of the RV. Not too much taller than the girl, he was anything but the male version of the beauty in front of him. Almost painfully thin, the man was lightly scarred on the face. He was very pale and between the dark clothes, tinted glasses and the complexion looked anything but healthy. The way he moved put paid to that lie however. He followed the man as he moved to one of the pumps and took out the feeder. He turned and called out.

><br> "Hey Emer? Tell yer man to turn on the pump."

><br> Steve looked back at the girl as she gave him another winning smile. He moved his hand down and switched on the device without moving his eyes from hers. She turned to give the man a reply.

><br> "Hey Uncle Joe. It's on."

><br> Steve's heart leapt with joy. The thought that 'Emer ' was single and free would keep him going through the rest of the night. He saw the counter run up to a twenty-dollar sale and the guy put the feed back. Turning to the girl again he started to ask her for the money when two forms shot from the side of the building, form the dark and grab the girl. She screamed as they roughly gripped her arms but quieted as she saw their faces.

><br> Steve did anything but calm down when he saw their faces. The high brow ridge and the teeth scared him but it was the glow of the eyes that really freaked him. The taller of the two attackers turned to the other and slapped him across the chest.

><br> "I told you we could get some food up here. You get the old guy and then we'll crack open the lobster shell here."

><br> Steve realised that the thug was talking about him in the booth. Grabbing a can of mace that an employee had stashed in the booth Joe turned and pointed the nozzle towards the door. He turned back at the sound of a scream as he saw the girl's uncle come out of the RV and shoot a crossbow bolt into the first thug's head. The creature's head snapped forward and he released the girl as he fell forward onto the booth. The one nearer to the RV ran forward to grab the man and was casually batted aside by a backhand slap. Steve saw the girl take on step sideways as the man reloaded and fired one more bolt into the creature in front of Joe. A scream mangled by the bolt already impaling it and the thing literally dissolved before his eyes. Looking again Steve saw the other one run off only to be taken by another crossbow bolt between the shoulders.

><br> It was very quiet as the older man walked up to the booth and picked up his niece. Holding her gently by the shoulders he checked her for scrapes and bruises but most importantly for bites. Finding none he guided her gently back towards the RV and sat her down inside. He stepped back outside and all emotion left his face.

><br> "How much for the gas?"

><br> Steve was dazed. Two guys had died in seconds and all that there was left was three short arrows and small piles of dust. A tap on the Perspex window dragged him out of the shock. He looked up to see the man reload the crossbow.

><br> "How much for the gas?"

><br> "N-nothing, man. Those guys were nuts. What did you do to them?"

><br> Looking on in disgust the man pointed the loaded crossbow at the attendant and asked his question again.

><br> "How much for the gas? And the security camera tape?"

><br> Steve felt his shock melt away when the guy pointed the weapon

at him. His hand flashed to the video recorder behind him and flipped out the cassette. Throwing it into the pay slot he pushed it through. 'Uncle Joe ' had a bored look on his face as he grabbed the cassette and then thumbed a fifty-dollar note free from a crumpled wad of money.

><br> "Keep the change."

><br> The guy turned and walked away as Steve scrambled for the lock on the door of the booth. He desperately needed to use the toilet. He heard another tap and saw the man lean in again to the booth window.

><br> "Ya couldn't give me directions to Sandal Street, could you?"

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><br> It took all of half an hour to get to the house that they would be staying in. It was a given that the gas station attendant wouldn't be saying anything to the cops. Having to admit that he crapped his drawers because someone asked him directions. And any other story he gave would only be laughed off because he had no proof.

><br> 'Uncle Joe' was at the steering wheel of the RV as it pulled into the drive of the house. As the vehicle came to a stop not too far from the front door the door in question opened to reveal a middle-aged man and woman. Their faces creased with worry as the man stepped out first with the crossbow in hand but changed to wide grins as the young girl came out behind him.

><br> "Mom. Dad."

><br> The girl fairly streaked across the gap between them to land in her mother's arms. The father gently patted his daughter's back until she reached across to include him in the hug. The group hug was broken up as the armed man gestured with his free hand towards the house.

><br> "Folks. We should go inside."

><br> Both parents gave the darkness outside a quick glance as they caught his meaning. Reaching into his pocket, the father pulled out a remote control and opened a large garage door at the side of the house. His daughter's travelling companion gave a grateful nod and got back into the RV before backing it into the garage, trailer and all.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Inside the house, the family waited for their guest. They could both see that their daughter was shaken by something.

><br> "Emer, what's wrong?"

><br> "We were attacked by vampires just outside of town. One of them was holding me by the arm."

><br> Both parents looked as the young woman uncovered an ugly bruise.

><br> "Is it bad here?"

><br> The family turned as one to see their visitor. The father stepped forward.

><br> "Welcome to our home. I am James Doherty and this is my wife Milla. Please sit."

><br> Taking the chair indicated, the man pulled his jacket off to reveal a faded black T-shirt with the logo 'U-2' on it. He twisted in the chair to get more comfortable and then leaned forward to grab his host's hand.

><br> "You can call me Josephus or Joe, whichever you prefer. You were going to say something?"

><br> The older looking man nodded and continued.

><br> "In answer to your question, yes. The problem is a great one and does not appear to be getting any smaller. We have prepared dossiers on the major players in the town. I have to tell you that it appears

that one of the most powerful is the town Mayor. We are unsure of his motivations and have not been able to get close with the usual equipment but we have succeeded with basic taps. The equipment has been set up but not fully utilised"

><br>Doherty reached behind his seat and took a handful of folders from a battered box. Handing them to his guest he took one last look at some of the labels on the folders- 'Mayor', 'Slayer 1', 'Slayer 2?', 'Angelus', 'Watcher 1', 'Watcher 2?'.

>Joseph's looked up from the folders and gave his host a hard look.<br>

> "Any sign of the thief?"<br>

> "We got word of someone matching his description in Los Angeles last night heading this way. If it was true then he is only in the town a few hours."<br>

> "Good. I'll go out tomorrow night. Is my place ready?"<br>

> "Yes, sir..Josephus."<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> The Slayerettes and Faith were having their usual mid-week gathering in the Bronze. Things were not going well, as per usual.<br>

> "Well Buff-ster, anything new on the Slayer front?"<br>

> Buffy rolled her eyes at Xander's attempt to break the deafening silence that held the gang. Each of them was silent for some reason or other and did not seem to be prepared to talk about it. Zander was still thinking things over since his run in with the 'zombie hillbillies from hell' as he put it. Jack and his knife kept coming back in his nightmares. Willow was having a really bad day. Between having to do all the stuff she did and now being lumped with Percy the Wrestling Moron her life was going to hell. And Buffy's boyfriend was just back from Hell and she was having problems with it.<br>

> "No, Xander. I was just thinking about what Giles keeps saying- something big is coming up and we have no idea as to what it is."<br>

> Buffy's little white lie got past her friends. It didn't make her mood disappear and it kept unpleasant subjects from coming up. She couldn't take the chance that the silence wouldn't hit again so she threw her coat on and grabbed her bag. The gang looked up and watched her every move. Willow elected herself to voice the gang's question.<br>

> "Are you going on patrol? I thought that you didn't need to with this Mister Trick being dead."<br>

> "I'm just going to make a quick patrol and then call it a night. I'll see you in the morning."<br>

> Before anyone could say anything she was through the door and gone from sight. Nobody followed her. They knew that if Buffy didn't want company she could just turn on the speed and leave a car in her dust.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Buffy wasn't really looking for some trouble but it found her. Her usual patrol took in most of the smaller car parks that ringed the centre of Sunnydale. Vampires and some hungry demons usually managed to pick off the occasional lone motorist returning to their car. The Slayer ran into a trio of vampires who had just arrived to stake out a claim for the night. The few tactics that Buffy had had gone to elephant snot two seconds into the fight. A spin kick had hit the roof of a car and deflected it above a charging vampire's head. Shocked by it's success the demon knocked her from her feet and into the bonnet of a car, stunning her. <br>

> Shaking her head, Buffy could feel two of the demons grab her hands and spread-eagle her across the car so the third could feed. A few

seconds passed as the vampires waited for their companion but nothing happened. Buffy could feel the dizziness dissipate and she saw the two demons look on in fear at their 'friend'.<br>

> Buffy twisted her head slightly to see the upside down picture of a vampire with a crossbow bolt in the head. The Slayer decided to use the distraction to the best of her ability. Kicking out she knocked one of the vampires back, freeing her hand. Flicking her wrist, she dislodged a stake strapped to her lower arm and sunk it's point into the heart of the other vampire holding her. With a scream it dissolved and she swung around to confront the other vampire only to see it pinned to the side of a van by another bolt. The first vampire to be shot disappeared in a cloud of dust as another crossbow bolt hit it, this time with more lethal accuracy.<br>

> She crouched down looking for the bowman but could only glimpse movement well out of her interception range. Without a word her saviour disappeared. Taking this to be her cue to end her nights patrol she staked the last vampire. Just as she was about to leave the scene she grabbed two of the crossbow bolts and tucked them into her Slayer-bag. Then she got the hell out of there.<br>

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> 'Josephus', or Joe as he called himself now, got back to the house that was now his base of operations. He was going over the tactics that the Slayer had used to take down the three vampires and could only come up with one conclusion. She had to be the newer of the two Slayers. It hadn't been the first time that Family intelligence had been wrong about something like this. He would have to go over the information again with James. He grimaced. <br>

>\*It isn't good to attract attention to members of the Family. Not even with something as big as this. \*<br>

>Over the years the rules that governed his life and that of the Family caused a lot of separation between him and the outside world. But even when the loneliness was at it's worst he could take comfort in the fact that being what he was would not attract attention to people he had to protect. He gave the single large room a look over again. <br>

>Situated on the alley between two blocks it had originally been a machine shop that had a shop on the front. A small newsagent had taken over the shop area and the machinists had been laid bare from disuse. The factory had the typical foreman's office up a set of stairs at the back of the room. The emergency exits had been blocked over so the only opening was the large access door to the front and a row of small windows that ran the length of the ceiling. A pair of partitions divided the room into three sections, an entrance area, a work area with computers, two large lockers and a small library. The final section was the most important at the moment. A TV, video, Playstation, a pair of large sofas and a small video library were it's only contents.<br>

> Shrugging off his overcoat and throwing it across one of the new sofas, Joe removed the shoulder holster rig that allowed him to carry his crossbow and quiver. He smiled at the anachronism. Here he was using state of the art equipment to monitor the comings and goings of every major player in Sunnydale and he was still using a crossbow.<br>

>\* You'd think that after eleven hundred years I could use something more up to date. \* <br>

> Walking through the improvised lounge Joe grabbed the phone and dialled a number. The call was answered quickly.<br>

> "Hello, Doherty residence."<br>

> "Emer, Joe here. How are you doing?"<br>

> There was a slight hesitation.<br>

> "All right. What do you need?"<br>  
> "Do you think you'd be up to calibrating the sensor network tomorrow? I've planted most of the gear and just needed to know if you could finish the computer work."<br>  
> Again, the hesitation.<br>  
> "Sure. I'll be there around lunchtime."<br>  
> "That'll be perfect. See you then."<br>  
>\* The dial tone didn't come quick enough for the poor girl \*, Josephus thought.<br>  
>He had seen the shock that comes before, during and after a demon attack. Lucky for Emer it had come well after. Going back over the incident in his head he remembered that Emer had used her head and kept cool. He'd buried too many people that hadn't.<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
> "I'm telling you it felt like a demon. And he wasn't aiming for me."<br>  
> Giles saw the concern on Buffy's face. He knew that when Angelus had stalked her he had used the same method: keeping out of her way, using others to attack her and wear her down, then move in. Not for the kill but just to hurt her and do a bit of taunting. And it had hurt a lot.<br>  
> "We will look through the Watcher Chronicles for someone with the same modus operandi....."<br>  
> Giles covered his face with his hand. Wesley seemed to be getting more annoying as every day went by and if he got even the slightest bit worse his pomposity would jump up and bite him in the ass. In the form of a well placed kick from Buffy.<br>  
> "Wesley, I think we should start and let Buffy get to classes."<br>

> Wesley turned and gave the former Watcher an angry look. He hated the fact that Giles was far more adept a Watcher than he and that he enjoyed a relationship with Buffy that he could never hope to equal. Buffy walked out before he could give her his official Watcher approval to her going to classes. As the door shut behind the young woman Wesley turned back to Giles again.<br>  
> "You must remember that you are no longer the Slayer's Watcher and can have no part in her Slayer activities."<br>  
> Before Wesley could come get his second wind Giles hit him with the answer he had been dying to use on the pompous little git.<br>  
> "If that is so then you'll have to go somewhere I can't. As long as you use this library then I must be present to give it authenticity so that the school does not question the late night meetings. As it is your presence is attracting the Principal's attention and that is not acceptable."<br>  
> Wesley deflated. He knew that Giles was right. So far Wesley had simply relied on the few methods that he had learned from the Watcher diaries, and that had been precious little. He walked over to the table and grabbed one of the diaries in question. The only thing he could do was try to find out anything about this unknown being. <br>

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> The 'unknown being' was settling down to an early dinner of sweet and sour chicken, fried rice and a side order of curried chips with extra curry. Sitting back in the sofa he clicked on the TV to find any channel with an episode of Star Trek on it. After ten seconds he got lucky. <br>  
> \* There is nothing like a good Chinese meal, a few bevvies and a dose of Star Trek first thing in the morning. \*<br>  
> Throwing his feet onto the table he grabbed a can of beer and pulled off the tab. With the other hand in motion he forked up a hunk

of the curried chips while following Kirk and his intrepid crew on their latest adventures. He managed this for about five minutes before there was a knock on the front door. Throwing back the last of the can he stuffed the empty down the back of the sofa.<br>  
> \*No point in the Family thinking I'm a borderline alco. \*<br>  
> He trotted over to the door and opened it. Looking outside he saw two of the Doherty family, father and daughter, standing beside their car. With a simple wave he invited them in.<br>  
> "Thank you for coming Emer. I've set up all the stuff but I'm sure that it will need a bit of tweaking before anything will work properly."<br>  
> He gave the girl a smile but knew that every time that she looked at him she saw someone capable of doing what he had done to those two vampires. And the fear grew as she thought of that violence being turned on her. <br>  
> With a guiding hand her father brought her into the place. He ignored his daughter's nervousness and tried to divert her from her thoughts.<br>  
> "I thought this would be the most suitable place for you. I had Emer check the local realtor and the underground maps to give you a place that would give you easy access to above and below ground. And as per your instructions it would be near several take-aways."<br>  
  
> Even Emer smiled at that last remark as her eyes slid over the contents of the old warehouse. A cleaning crew and a decorator had removed most of the crud that had collected over the years but it could still be described as spartan. Then her eyes hit the stack of take away boxes and they lit up. She gave Josephus an amused glance. He followed her gaze and smiled slightly at the mess. <br>  
> "Breakfast. You want some?"<br>  
> James Doherty had to laugh as his daughter's face blushed deep crimson at the thought of eating that food this early. As she mumbled a 'no' he gave the Family Protector a grateful grin.<br>  
> "If you don't mind I'll be on my way. I have some work to do."<br>  
  
> Joe knuckled his forehead and gave the older looking man a shallow bow.<br>  
> "Yessir. And us ungrateful wretches will toil away with our satellite dish, two hundred channels, Playstation and the rest while you have an easy morning balancing the books of an ungrateful town. Yessir."<br>  
> With another laugh Doherty went out the door.<br>  
> Joe suddenly remembered the incident from the previous night and ran after the man, waiting only long enough to motion Emer to 'Stay there'.<br>  
> "James. I need to make sure that the older of the two Slayers is the small blonde one."<br>  
> Doherty frowned.<br>  
> "We are sure of this sir. Our records indicate that the Slayer, Buffy, has been in Sunnydale for some time and has been seen patrolling. The newer one is different and has shown significant violent tendencies in her Slaying capacity."<br>  
> Joe could only nod at this. He gave the Family man a nod of thanks and went back into the warehouse.<br>  
> By the time Joe had returned Emer had the computer booted up and was sorting the system out. He came up slowly towards her.<br>  
> "I've planted the first batch of crystal bugs in the sewers and have monitors on the school switchboard and the key players' houses. I haven't checked the signals on any of the sewer sensors, just the phone monitors."<br>

> Emer nodded an okay and clicked on the receivers. In minutes she had ninety percent on line. Each of the crystal bugs were a mess of magic and electronic, the brainchild of one of her many Irish cousins. By using a crystal that glows when a demon approaches and a photoelectric diode to measure the glow, Josephus could get a good estimate of the amount of vampires that inhabited the town. As to the others demons, well he had other things for that but by and large his problem was the vampires and the thief.<br>

> Leaving Emer to get on with it, Joe got on with breakfast but changed his viewing media to the file, the few facts that they had, on the thief. <br>

> Rayne, Ethan Thomas. Forty-six years of age, known to dabble in the black arts. The list that they had was next to useless but it did have a photograph that had been taken by a security camera. With the technology that they had the Family had got a very good likeness. After some inquiries the blame for the theft was linked to the Watchers because of one of Rayne's old friends, Rupert 'Ripper' Giles. That had been dismissed and revived very quickly when the thief had headed for the friend in question.<br>

> Come the midnight hour, Ripper was going to meet the Pale Man.<br>

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> Buffy was heading into class when she remembered the crossbow bolts. She had taken a good while the night before looking at them. They were a far cry from the bolts that she fired from her own crossbow. These seemed to be made of sections, one of which was wood. Two bands of metal ran the length of the bolt to give it additional strength. The tip was made of the same metal and was strong. She'd actually grunted trying to bend it when it snapped.<br>

> She walked into biology class and spent the whole time zoned out trying to think of the person who would be doing this. The first answer that kept coming up was the one that she didn't want to here. <br>

>\* Angelus. \*<br>

> She had been caring for Angel now for the last few months and hadn't seen any sign of the demon that was Angelus. But she hadn't seen any signs when Angelus had resurfaced the last time. The class ended and Buffy still wasn't any closer to the truth as far as she was concerned. She jumped as she felt a hand touch her elbow.<br>

> " Buffy?"<br>

> The Slayer looked up to see Willow giving her a very worried look. She had a sudden idea. And quickly stamped it down. Today was so far a bad Willow-Buffy day. A simple request had got her friend all snarky about being so dependable and reliable. Buffy had been afraid that she was going to do something stupid but now it felt as if nothing was wrong.<br>

> "Will, can you tell me what type of metal this is?"<br>

> She took the piece of bolt that she had broken off the night before. Willow took it from her and ran her fingers along it. She walked up to the teacher and had a quick talk with her. A few seconds later she returned to her bench and grabbed a few tools and beakers from the side benches. In seconds she had the piece in tweezers and dipped it into the largest beaker. The piece dissolved at one end. Buffy was at her side moments later.<br>

> Willow was happy to be doing something that would take her mind off what had happened with Buffy earlier. And Anya's request would allow her to show that she could do some actual good outside the Scooby Gang's normal day. Doing this would take her mind off the preparations that she would have to go through for the spell to be a complete success. And it would stop her blabbing to Buffy about what



she was going to do. The last thing she wanted was another lecture from Giles about 'playing around with magic'. Especially with what happened with Zander. Getting her mind back on track, Willow took what she knew and gave it to Buffy in simple terms.<br>

> "It's a plastic but not like the ones they use for making toys. More like the one in bulletproof vests. It's fairly expensive to get something like this done."<br>

> Willow paused for all of half a second. If she waited any longer she would probably blurt out something about the spell.<br>

> "You'd better tell Giles about this, Buffy."<br>

> "Not yet. And I don't want you telling him anything either. If it is another Hunt then they are playing different rules and I don't want Giles making himself a target."<br>

> Buffy didn't have to mention Wesley helping her. He would just say that a Watcher's job was to Watch and not to interfere with a Slayer discharging her duties. As Giles had put it, he was a Pillock. Whatever that was.<br>

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> The day went pretty quickly for Joe. It consisted mostly of tweaking the system that Emer had designed to monitor the comings and goings of the Slayer's, their Watcher's and any vampires that he might run into. A few of the crystal bugs had registered demonic movement, which was unusual during the day. Maybe it was the proximity to the Hellmouth but it appeared that above ground was going to be the safest medium of travel for the night. <br>

> After Emer had finished her little job Joe, or Uncle Joe as she still called him, had decided to treat her to a quick dinner out. It had gone fairly well and by the end of the meal she was speaking to him in more than monosyllables. They had just got back to The Palace as Emer called it when her father arrived. After a few quick words they were off. 'Uncle Joe' disappeared and Josephus the Pale Man came to the fore. In seconds the more durable clothes that were necessary for this work replaced the street clothes. <br>

> Over the clothes went the crossbow rig and the quiver with its load. A couple of vampire flash-bang grenades and a few extra-strong cable ties were stuffed into specially sewn pockets and for extra luck, a silenced twenty-two-calibre pistol and a knife. The last two were a precaution against humans who posed a threat. These two items had a lot of wear and tear on them. Once finished Josephus sat down and waited for the clock by the computer to hit midnight.<br>

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> It was early enough when Giles got back to his flat. As much as he enjoyed the role of librarian his motivation in life was that of Watcher. With that gone and the death of Jenny Calender he hadn't a lot left to do. He got a quick snack and went to turn on the TV. A few minutes of CNN and he'd be gone back to the library for the 'Scooby Gang bi-weekly Slayage update' as Zander had so succinctly put it. <br>

> \*What I wouldn't give for a decent half-hour of Coronation Street.\*<br>

> He reached for the On-switch and got slammed face first into the screen as the sofa catapulted forward. Stunned, he couldn't do much but wave his hands feebly as he was grabbed by the lapels and thrown across the room. The edge of unconsciousness came and went, as a foul smelling tablet was broken under his nose. <br>

> "Can't have you passing out on us now can we?"<br>

> Giles looked up to see a pair of black coloured eyes looking down at him. He struggled to free his hands.<br>

> "You'll only hurt yourself. Cable ties are a great invention."<br>

> The former Watcher's mind went into overdrive. The thing didn't seem to be a vampire. Maybe a demon or a member of the Order of Teraka. His mind went through a hundred possibilities. A slap to the face stopped the thinking.<br>

> "Right. Lets get down to the reason I am perfectly willing and able to inflict a large amount of pain on you, Watcher-boy. Two words: Ethan Ray..."<br>

> The Watcher jumped forward in an effort to head butt his attacker but got shoved down for his poor effort. Giles settled for swearing instead.<br>

> "That. Absolute. BASTARD. This is the last time that turd wrecks my life. I am going to kick the almighty crap out of him and stomp his bollix into paste.... "<br>

> Giles could see movement under the mask that hid the majority of his attacker's face. He took it to be a smile and cut his tirade short.<br>

> "I take it that you are acquainted with the thief. Good. Now the 'little piece of dog shit' as you so aptly put it stole something from me and has it here in Sunnydale. I want it back. I have a file on Rayne and on in the column that says 'Friends', Ripper Giles features fairly prominently. Now I have two toys..."<br>

> Giles saw the man reach behind his back for and pull out a gun and a knife. His 'interesting upbringing' made it easy for him to identify the silencer on the gun and the fact that the knife was the type that butchers used to fillet meat. He gave it all up.<br>

> "Ethan Rayne is not my friend. I would get a great amount of satisfaction out of beating him to a bloody pulp and then beating him some more. He has tried to kill people I care about and myself several times."<br>

> "Who would know his location?"<br>

> "Willie. He owns a bar that ...accommodates for demons."<br>

> "Where?"<br>

> The Watcher gave him the address.<br>

> Giles looked up at Josephus, trying to see if what he had said had made any impact. All he could see was the man regarding a point in space behind him. He twisted his head around to see an opened backpack on the desk behind him. Some sort of electronic device inside had several green lights blinking on and off over it's surface. He turned back to look at his attacker again. All he got for his questioning look was a shrug.<br>

> "I think you're telling the truth so I'll be off. If you find Rayne keep him here and then we'll have words. Nice to have met you, Ripper."<br>

> Closing the backpack and holstering the gun and knife took only seconds. Once that was done Josephus walked to the phone and dialled a series of numbers. Giles craned his head to see that his attacker was dialling Buffy's number. A familiar voice came over the line. Josephus didn't give her time to speak.<br>

> "Your Watcher needs your help. And if you need to guess, it's Ripper. Bye-bye."<br>

> He hung up.<br>

> "See ya, Ripper."<br>

> Josephus left, leaving the door ajar.<br>

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> Giles had to wait only a couple of minutes for Buffy to get there.<br>

>When the call had come she and Zander had been just about to leave her house for the Bronze. A quick explanation to her friend had sent him home to wait for news and she had been off at full speed.<br>

>She came in hard, slamming the door open and in full Slayer mode. She ran to Giles and gave a tug to the restraints. Giles only felt them dig deep into wrists. A few seconds later they fell to the floor as his former charge cut the cable ties away. <br>

> "Who was it? A demon. Something else?"<br>

> The Watcher could only shake his head and rub his wrists.<br>

> "I don't know, Buffy. I didn't get a good look at him but he was using some sort of device to see if I was lying. And he knew your number and a lot about my past and Ethan Rayne."<br>

> Buffy's hand tightened on the stake as she heard the name of the sorcerer. Every time that that man had shown his face it had meant trouble for her and everyone else in Sunnydale.<br>

> "Did he say anything else?"<br>

> "I told him about Willie. He'll go there next. Go, I'll be all right."<br>

> Buffy gave her friend a good look and then raced out the door.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Joe left the Watcher's house in a hurry. Once clear of the well-lit areas he hurried up and made for the address that the Watcher had given him. It didn't take long. When he had reached the end of the street that he knew the bar to be on he slowed to a walk and calmed himself. If the bar catered to demons then there would be more than a few in there.<br>

> From the outside the bar looked lit a pit. Inside was little different. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom Josephus got a good look at the customers. There were about twenty, twenty-five in all, most of differing types. A few gnarled faces suggested that about half were vampires. <br>

> He walked up to the bar and sat at one of the free stools well away from the other customers. The bag with it's precious merchandise on the floor beside it. The bartender came up to him slowly and gave him a quick once over. With a smile he started his spiel.<br>

> "What can I do you for?"<br>

> Joe slid a hundred-dollar bill across the table.<br>

> "Ethan Rayne. His location and there's two more for you."<br>

> Willie looked down at the money and back up at the customer. Most people who acme looking for answers to questions usually tried two methods: violence or being his new friend. This was new.<br>

> "Who's asking? Just for the record, like."<br>

> Joe didn't bother with an answer. Without a word he moved across the gap between himself and the customers behind him. Grabbing one of the nearest vampires he pulled out one of his special 'flash-bang' grenades and shoved it in it's mouth. Kicking its legs out from under it Josephus let the demon fall to the ground and saw the grenade detonate a second later.<br>

> The grenade wasn't exactly a 'flash-bang'. What it did was very simple. It filled a room was holy water mist in about half a second. Another member of the engineering branch of the Family had been messing about with his sister's perfume atomiser. Instead of a gentle spray she got the entire contents of a BB gun's CO2 cartridge dumped into the atomiser. It took a week before she could smell anything again.<br>

> The vampire's face melted and it dusted in a heartbeat. But not before it let out an agonising scream. Joe stepped over the pile and walked back to the bar. He reached across and grabbed Willie by the lapels.<br>

> "I will kill every customer you have in this bar and I'll nail you to the front door after. Ethan Rayne, where is he?"<br>

> Willie stammered out a reply but it fell on deaf ears. Two demons had grabbed Josephus by the shoulders and pulled him back. He stopped his fall by grabbing his barstool and ripping it from the floor. He swung the broken end of the stool into the face of the first demon and kicked out behind him to distance the other. As the first Yenthex demon, with a blue head and green ram's horns, hit the floor Joe turned his attention to the other Yenthex. Seeing that it was backing off all the way he went back to the first one and gave it two more vicious hits with the stool before dropping it to the floor. Giving the remaining customers and Willie a long look he stepped forward and grabbed the piece of paper that Willie was holding out. <br>

> "He's at that hotel."<br>

> With a smile Josephus gave Willie a little bow and walked out, grinning widely.<br>

> Where he ran face first into the Slayer.<br>

> It wasn't any description that set her into trying to punch him, she didn't have one. It was probably the fact that he seemed sober and was stepping out of a bar like Willie's with a smile on his face. The first hit landed dead on target, smashing into the side of Joe's jaw. The only thing that saved him was that the punch was aimed to knock out a human. He shook off the momentary shock to kick out at Buffy's stomach with nearly all his full strength. He knew that she could take it and was gratified to see her fold over winded. He heard someone shout the Slayer's name and saw a figure approaching fast from down the street.<br>

> Taking that to be his cue Joe legged it around the corner and kept taking turns and back alleys until he was sure that he had lost any pursuit. <br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Buffy struggled to her feet, taking in gasps of air. Whoever that guy had been, he clearly wasn't human. She felt a hand grab her elbow and she immediately went on the defensive as best she could. Pushing away, she looked up to see Angel reaching for her again. This time she let him catch her.<br>

> "I didn't - GASP - get a - GASP - good look at - GASP - him."<br>

> "Save your breath, Buffy. You're still winded."<br>

> She gave the vampire a 'you're-not-kidding' look. Somehow he managed to look more saddened. Helping her upright he guided her to the sidewalk and sat her down. Within a minute or so she had her wind back. She pointed to the bar.<br>

> "We have to find out what he was after with Willie."<br>

> Angel stood and helped her to her feet. He waited for her to tidy herself up and they started into make Willies day even worse. As they got in the door, Willie went into the usual 'Oh hi. It's the Slayer' warning for the customers, most of who disappeared out the back door. A few who were too drunk to move or too frightened stayed put.<br>

> The first thing that caught Buffy's eye was the pile of fresh dust on the floor and the hole where one barstool seemed to have been. Willie was already getting the brush to remove that loyal customer.<br>

> "Can I help you? Oh hi Angel. How was Hell?"<br>

> "What did the guy who just left here want?"<br>

> "Ethan Rayne. As I told him, Rayne is at the Sunnydale Lodge. Now if you don't remind I have to pay last respects to one of my dearest customers."<br>

> He began to sweep the vampire's dust into the hole left by the barstool. Buffy and Angel took that as Willie's last word for the evening and left.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Joe made his way to the Sunnydale lodge by way of a cab that he managed to stop. With a healthy tip he covered the few miles in minutes and kicked down the door of Rayne's room seconds later. Quickly ripping apart most of the furniture didn't turn up the book or any idea as to where the thief had gone for the night. With a few choice curses he left just as the sounds of the sirens started getting louder pulling into the car park. As he jumped over the rear wall he caught a glance of Buffy and the man who had run up to help her outside Willie's. It was only now that the face clicked with a name. Angelus. <br>

>\* What the hell is a demon doing with a Slayer. \*<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Buffy and Angel got nothing from the cops when they arrived. Since they couldn't see a Coroner's van or an ambulance around it was safe to say that the attacker hadn't found Rayne. Or had just dragged him off somewhere else to 'talk' to him. Either way, Buffy didn't much care for the odds on Ethan Rayne surviving the rest of the week. <br>

> "I'm going to go back to Giles'. "<br>

> Angel's face contorted with guilt as he thought about going near the Watcher's house. Over the last few years he had learnt most of the limits of Giles' ability to absorb pain, even more so when Angelus had tortured him over Acathla. It had been Drusilla imitating the murdered teacher Jenny Calendar to get any information out of him. The look of loss on Giles' face when he realised it hadn't been his love had been priceless to Angelus. Now it only caused Angel untold pain.<br>

> "I'm going to go back to the mansion. Will I see you later?"<br>

> Buffy gave her friend a look. She couldn't think of him as her boyfriend again without thinking of Angelus. I was almost funny. She had spent all that time fighting Angelus and every time that had she had only seen Angel and not the demon. Now it was the other way around. She gave the only answer she could.<br>

> "Yes. I'll come around later."<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Buffy got back to the complex around an hour later. She'd made an impromptu patrol out of the journey and managed to 'bag a vamp' as she called it. <br>

>\*Chalk one more down for the Slayer. Ra-ra go Slayer. \*<br>

> As she got closer to the door she heard voices coming from inside. Slowing slightly and keeping out of sight of the entrance to the flat, Buffy crept up to the door. She finally recognised Giles' voice coming from inside. He did not sound happy. Another voice chimed in, one that was familiar.<br>

> She kicked out and knocked the door in. Ethan Rayne was on the floor looking up at the enraged Giles. The Watcher was far from recovered from his last visitor. An ugly set of bruises covered the side of his face and his hands shook from the damage that the cable ties had done to his wrists. But it hadn't stopped him from laying the sorcerer out. She reached forward and grabbed Rayne lifting him to his feet, and pulled her fist back for a punch.<br>

> "Buffy, don't."<br>

> The Slayer looked back at her former Watcher in shock. The prospect of seeing Ethan Rayne beaten to a pulp seemed to have been one of the things that Buffy knew Giles wanted to see more than anything else.<br>

> "He knows who the attacker is."<br>

> "Sure he knows. He brought the guy here."<br>

> Rayne shrugged free of her grip.<br>  
> "He's not a guy. He is a Pale Man."<br>  
> "A what?"<br>  
> "A Pale Man. He's sort of like a Slayer but without the conscience. About four hundred years ago the Watchers ran into the Pale Man for the first time when Cromwell invaded Ireland. There was a large number of senior Watchers working with Cromwell and they gave him their support because they heard of a library hidden in Ireland. If Cromwell managed to seize it the Watchers would get the library. They failed but the majority of the library custodians were killed off, as were their families. Some were tortured and revealed they worked for the Pale Man. Soon after the senior Watchers started to die in fairly imaginative ways."<br>  
> Buffy rolled her eyes at the history lesson.<br>  
> "What does this have to do with you?"<br>  
> "Some of the books rumoured to be in the library were the Chronicles of the Council, the books that recounted the origins of the Slayer and the Watchers. Ever since you came into your abilities the Watchers have been searching for them. About a month ago the asked some questions of some people but didn't really listen to the answers." <br>  
> Giles looked up at his enemy in shock. Those books were considered to be myths even by the most optimistic of Watcher researchers. He stepped forward and grabbed his former friend. <br>  
> "Where are the books?"<br>  
> Ethan waved his finger in front of Giles' face and shook his head.<br>  
> "Not so fast. I need something from..."<br>  
> Giles grabbed the finger and bent it back to the point of breaking.<br>  
> "Tell me."<br>  
> "I heard about an obscure group of artefacts that had been seen in the South of Ireland. I went to the house and found what I think is a fragment of the library. I got some of the books and saw their translations when the custodians interrupted me. I had to get out of there quickly and only managed to get three of the sixteen, and none of the translations. And now the Pale Man is after me." <br>  
> "Why? Now that I think about it, why not?"<br>  
> "The custodians have a relationship to the Pale Man like you have to the Slayer. When I stole from them, I stole from him."<br>  
> "Where are the books?"<br>  
> Ethan gave Giles a knowing smile that changed to a gasp as his finger broke. He stepped back and grabbed his wrist. Giles stepped forward again and Ethan held up his untouched hand to stop him. He shook his head and pointed at the window.<br>  
> "They're in a bag outside. I knew that whatever happened no-one would look outside your house for them."<br>  
> Buffy raced outside and plunged into the bushes that masked the back of Giles' flat. It took a few seconds of fumbling in the dark before light from the window fell on a symmetrical shape. She reached for it and stopped.<br>  
> \*You never know with Rayne. \*<br>  
> The Slayer picked up a piece of wood and poked it through the handgrip on the bag, lifting it from the ground. Carefully moving inside she placed it in front of the owner.<br>  
> "Open it."<br>  
> Ethan reached for the bag and opened it carefully. Buffy pulled him back before he could reach inside. She stepped in front of the bag and reached inside pulling out a small gun.<br>  
> "Nice."<br>

> Giving the gun to Giles, she reached in again and took out a couple of thin books, each of them leather covered and pitted with age. Reaching in again she could feel more of the same. She handed the few she had taken out to Giles and pushed the sorcerer down into a seat. Taking a seat behind Rayne she let Giles go over the books carefully. After a minute or so and before Buffy could say anything the former Watcher held up his hand. <br>  
> "These are written in a pre-flood dialect of one of the ancient languages. I think it evolved into Sanskrit but I can only check this out at the library."<br>  
> "Can we be sure that this Pale Man won't come back here again?"<br>  
  
> Ethan went to stand up but Buffy slammed him back down into the chair. Giles just shook his head and said,<br>  
> "He has no reason to come back here but we should take precautions. Are you up to staying here and keeping an eye on him?"<br>  
> He gestured to Ethan with disgust.<br>  
> "I'll have to call my Mom."<br>  
> She picked up the phone as Giles went to his kitchen to look for his first aid kit and some rope. Some rope would do considering this was Rayne but the Watcher, former Watcher, didn't want to spend the night listening to the pillock whimpering.<br>  
> "Mom, I have to..."<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
> "...stay over at Giles'. Major study party."<br>  
> Joe played back the recording. The rest was just mother and daughter stuff.<br>  
> So the Slayer was staying over with her friend. The amount of tension in her voice, however well disguised for her mother, showed that there had to be some other reason. He hit the Play button again. But turned the volume way up. In the background he could here a voice. He tried to hear around the conversation between the two principles and got lucky. A small pause and he hit paydirt.<br>  
> "Eth.....shut up.....real.....to scream."<br>  
> \*So Rayne had got smart and turned up after I hit his friend's house. \*<br>  
> Now there was a decision to make. Go out and hit the Watcher's house again with the Slayer there or leave it till morning when she heads for school. It wasn't much of a problem to choose between the options. Throwing his coat back onto the coat rack, Joe headed for bed.<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
> Buffy woke up grainy eyed from lack of sleep. She'd spent half the night watching Ethan for any signs of budding stupidity of the escaping type. The last thing she needed was to chase him half way across Sunnydale. Not that he would get very far. At two in the morning Giles had taken over and she had slept in the upstairs bed. It had taken some amount of effort to sleep in the bed that Jenny had been laid out in by Angelus. Once that thought had come out sleep had not been easy.<br>  
> "Good morning, Buffy."<br>  
> A hand reached across the bed with the elixir of the morning, coffee. Taking a good sip she sat up straighter in the bed and asked Giles the dread question.<br>  
> "What time is it?"<br>  
> "Half past five."<br>  
> Buffy grimaced and had to stop herself from flopping back into the bed. She swung her legs out and walked to the little bathroom. She splashed some water about for a few seconds and came back out. <br>

> "How is our guest? Or do I really want to know or care?"<br>  
> She looked down at their guest. He was asleep in his chair head down and hands bound behind him. Buffy could only smirk at the pain that Rayne would be in when he woke up: a crick in the neck, sore arms.... As the list grew so did Buffy's smile.<br>  
> "I'm going to head home and get ready for school. Will I see you later?"<br>  
> The librarian seemed to make a decision. Would it be safe to leave Ethan here on his own? <br>  
> "It would seem that the attacker was after the books more than anything else. And Ethan is less likely to run than you think. It's the first time I've ever seen him truly scared."<br>  
> Buffy nodded at the statement. <br>  
> "I'll see you at the library."<br>  
> She walked to the door and with an impish grin slammed it on the way out. Ethan woke with a start and jerked his head to the side to see what had made the noise. Buffy listened from outside as a strangled scream of agony came when the sorcerer's neck spasmed. <br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> It was nearly nine o'clock when Joe managed to wake. A quick look at his alarm clock told him why he hadn't woken earlier: he had forgot to set the alarm. With a stifled curse he ran for the shower. Two minutes later he struggled into clothes and ran for the front door. On reaching it he turned back and grabbed his backpack and dumped the polygraph. Seconds later he was gone out the door and off towards the Watcher's home.<br>  
> It took a lot of willpower to slow the car to a respectable speed. A few minutes and he would have the books back and he'd be in plenty of time for the U2 concert on Friday. He flicked on the radio to help himself calm down. After flicking through the half dozen channels he shut the radio off. All the channels seemed to be playing half-respectable sixties music or newer kids stuff. He needed to boil off some anger and a good dose of The Prodigy would help. The only problem was that he had left his collection back home in Ireland and the few 'good' CDs he had were all back at The Palace.<br>  
> It only took ten more minutes but it had felt like ten hours. Pulling his jeep up the kerb across from his target he gave the outside a good look. <br>

> \* No sign of the car. \*<br>

> Getting out carefully, Joe began to breathe deeply. In every situation that he had gone through like this, staying calm was the keyword. If he didn't a lot of factors would be forgotten and he would land in a world of trouble. Walking casually across the street he passed by some people and said hello to them. Keeping with the program Joe walked by the other flats to Giles' and opened the door with a hard push using a good chunk of his strength. And ran right into Ethan Rayne speaking on the phone.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> About thirty seconds after Ripper had left Ethan was out of the chair and the ropes. It had taken some amount of effort to get his broken finger through the bindings but he was no stranger to pain.<br>

> \* I'm going to get Ripper for that but first things first. \*<br>

> He got his bag from the floor where Giles had thrown it. Reaching into one of the smaller packets he felt along the seam and pulled out a scrap of paper with a local number on it. A quick dial and the dial tone changed to a ring. An unfamiliar voice picked it up. <br>

> " Mayor Wilkins office."<br>



> " The Mayor please. Tell him its Ethan Rayne calling."<br>  
> Seconds later the man himself was on.<br>  
> "Mister Rayne. So good to here from you again. How did you're hunting expedition go?"<br>  
> "Very well. I'm at my old friend's house and he has agreed the trip was good...."<br>  
> "I hear a 'but' coming along Mister Rayne. I think we should talk. Can you make a one thirty lunch? Rodale's on Main Street."<br>  
> "Someone is after..."<br>  
> "We'll meet later. And do bring some reading material. I don't want you to get bored."<br>  
> Everything and anything important that the Mayor was about to say lost all meaning as Rayne saw the Pale Man come through the front door of Giles' home.<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
> Pointing one finger at Rayne, Joe had only one thing to say.<br>  
  
> "If you scream or make me exert myself, I will not be happy."<br>  
  
> Rayne ran and dived headfirst through the window.<br>  
>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
> The Mayor heard a crash and nothing else. Hanging up his phone he pressed the stud on the intercom. He couldn't risk everything by calling official attention to this unfortunate dilemma. But it would soon sort itself out. <br>  
> Getting that incompetent to steal from the Family and come back here was good. Once he got the Pale Man's attention, it would only be a matter of time before he and the Slayer would butt heads. And from all accounts there would be a new Slayer called in a few days. But just in case...<br>  
> "Miss Kellner. Could you call Miss Faith and tell her that Ethan has called and needs to meet her at Rupert's house.<br>  
>With a happy grin, the Mayor returned to working for the betterment of Sunnydale.<br>  
><br>\*\*\*\*\*  
><br> Ethan hit the ground in a shower of glass and wood. Shaking his head free of the ringing he got to his feet and ran for the safety of the street. Once in the open the Pale Man couldn't touch him. It would attract too much attention. He looked back and saw the pursuer emerge from the remnants of the window, but with a lot more speed and grace than he had. And he looked pissed.  
><br> Joe could see the shift in emotion on Rayne's face. It went from hope to abject terror at the sight of him emerging from the house. Rayne ran as hard as he could and kept going right out into the street....  
><br> ...and into the path of a car. The car caught him full on smashing him into the front windscreen and then out onto the road. Joe kept on running and reached the body just as the motorist got out. The Pale Man didn't even bother trying for a pulse. There wouldn't be one but something's had to be done for the sake of everyone involved. He reached out and grabbed a passer-by.  
><br> "Call the police. Now."  
><br> The woman ran for a phone. She'd call for an ambulance but there was no need. Josephus had seen enough broken necks to know nothing short of necromancy would find his books for him. He needed to try another tack. And then he caught sight of the Slayer, or rather the other Slayer, Faith.  
><br> She was coming down the street as if she owned it. Dressed in a pair of ripped jeans and a dark top with a heavy leather jacket she strutted towards Josephus looking at everyone with a suspicious eye

as she proceeded. At last, the crowd got her attention and she wandered over. She caught a glimpse of the body and she got in closer until she could see its face. Josephus drew back to watch her. Keeping calm, he watched her face as she gave the body her complete attention. He could see the recognition dawn on her as the face clicked with a name.

><br> \*Time to introduce myself. \*

><br> He hardened his gaze and looked straight at her. It didn't take long for her Slayer sense to realise that she was being watched. She caught Joe's eye and he gestured towards the far side of the street and an empty alley. They walked across and kept apart but watched each other closely. Joe had to give her a weapons check.

><br> He reached to his pocket and slid only the tips of his fingers in. He saw the fingers on her right hand twitch as if gripping something.

><br> \* Success. As if I really needed her to be armed. \*

><br> They came to a stop not too far into the alley. He stepped back and leant against the wall. She relaxed slightly but kept her jacket loose and her hands free. She took the first shot.

><br> "So what do you want?"

><br> Josephus had to get the answer just right. She may be a Slayer but she is still a kid. And every kid is full of questions.

><br> "Nothing much, Faith. I just want some books that 'roadkill' had."

><br> Faith laughed at the nickname.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> She was intrigued. The Mayor had decided to give her a test and here she was talking to this guy. That brought her up short. The Mayor had taken her in and treated her better than anyone ever had. He had given her that apartment and all it's wonderful things and didn't ask much in return. And without judging her or asking her to live up to some perfect ideals.

><br>\*Time to end this. \*

><br> She leaned back against the wall of the alley. As if to balance herself she put her foot up to brace herself and give the guy in front of her a cute 'I'm no threat' pose. She folded her hands behind her back and palmed her knife in the process. And then she pushed forward. Hard.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe caught the signs as they were happening. Her smile and eyes widened as if in friendliness and her pose relaxed but the signs were there. Her breathing quickened, not noticeably, but it did. And then she jumped forward using her leg like a piston against the wall behind her. Her hand came from behind her back holding a wicked looking knife that she pointed straight towards him. And he wasn't there.

><br> The thing with surprise is that it is definitely a one way thing. And it's overrated in most cases. But if you have two well-trained killers, surprise can make for a very short fight. Which this was.

><br> As Faith kicked off, Josephus was already headed to the ground. By the time the Slayer had hit the far wall the Pale Man had his little twenty-two out and was firing up at her. It took all of two seconds to empty the clip. But it was more than enough.

><br> The bullets weren't carefully aimed and went all over the place. With six bullets in all, two hit nothing but fresh air. Two did little damage, one creasing the Slayer's skull and the other her side. But the last two did the deed smashing into her lower back, inches apart. With a screech she hit the ground and kicked out. The kicking stopped as the pain hit her and she curled into a ball. But

Joe didn't care. As soon as the last bullet was gone he was racing for the far end of the alley and the sewer grating there. By the time someone responded to Faith's scream, he was gone.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Once the Mayor heard about the shooting he was over at the hospital as quickly as he could. At this stage of the game, to lose such an important piece like Faith was disastrous. He brushed aside the police as they waited on word from the doctors. He pointed at the well-dressed Chief of Police and gave him a 'stay-here' stare.

><br>\*So small-minded. \*

><br> That was the last thought that he gave to the police. He walked calmly up to the Chief Resident and gave him the typical politician's greeting.

><br> "I'm sorry to bother you, Doctor, but you have a patient that is a dear friend of mine. Her name is Faith..."

><br> The doctor nodded when he heard the name.

><br> "Yes, sir. I'm happy to say that Faith is not severely hurt but we had to sedate her and we will have to keep her in over night. Apparently when her attacker shot her he shot through her leather jacket and hit a sort of scabbard that was sewn into the lining. Any blood loss occurred from two scrapes she got from near misses. But she's recovering very quickly and she should be able to go home tomorrow."

><br> The Mayor nodded. He knew that this doctor was fairly competent by anyone's standards. Giving the doctor the typical politician's 'I'm very grateful- call if you need anything' speech, Wilkins walked into his Slayer's room. Gently running his hand across the girl's forehead, he sighed.

><br>" Everything's going to be fine. We'll try to find the guy who did this to you and you'll talk with him and I'll clear up the mess. And then everything will proceed to the Ascension."

><br>Hearing a cough behind him, the Mayor turned around to see a middle-aged nurse looking at him.

><br>"I'm sorry to bother you, Mayor but your office is on the telephone."

><br>He gave the nurse an acknowledging nod and walked out to the phone. A few seconds later he was back to Faith's room.

><br>"I have to go now Faith. When you are better we can have so much fun."

><br> He turned to leave and saw the nurse back at the door again. She gave him a look that reassured him about the level of attention his girl was going to have.

><br> "Nurse. I want it known now that no expense is to be spared in caring for this girl. She's the nearest thing I have to a daughter."

><br>

> "Yes of course Mayor."<br>

> With the last possible thing done that he could do, Mayor Wilkins left the building.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> A nurse for more than twenty years, Ludmilla Doherty was more than capable of lying. Usually it was to patients about their chances of survival. It was her training that saw to that. And once she saw the Mayor with someone who might be the Slayer, she knew that her husband had to know about this. Once she had seen the Mayor to his limousine with the Chief of Police and she returned to the nurses' station and rang up her husband. She generally stayed out of Family business but she knew the major players as well as he did. And he had to know about this. <br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

>As his limousine drove back to the Town Hall the Mayor was very deep in thought. From what he had been able to get from the Chief of Police the shooting had occurred not far from an accident that had claimed the life of one Ethan Rayne. Losing Rayne was not too much of a problem but the manner in which Faith did pose certain difficulties. <br>

> One, the person or persons who shot Faith might try again. Two, it could be the Pale Man who is joining the dots and they lead to me and finally three. The Slayer is changing tactics.<br>

> The last possibility did not ring true. She was too good for that. The first was a problem but the police could take care of that to a certain extent. He made a note to tell some of the 'boys' to keep an eye on the hospital for the night and especially Faith. <br>

> It was the second possibility that raised the biggest problem. If the Pale Man had 'asked' Rayne about who wanted the book, he had no doubt that the sorcerer would have squealed like a stuck pig. But there was no way of knowing. And there was no real background on the Pale Man to formulate any sort of defence. The only thing that he had been able to find out was that they were not really big on leaving witnesses.<br>

> The Mayor couldn't help but flash back to his little girl lying in that hospital bed. For one second he had nearly lost control. And then he remembered his few words and he had to grimace. He had lost control and that was never good for someone in his position.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Willow trudged into school over an hour and twenty minutes to spare. Normally, she would have come in a lot earlier and with more of a spring in her step at the thought of school. But last night had been an exception. She had been ready to go out the door with the supplies for the spell when a phone call from Zander had told her that Giles was in trouble. And that Buffy wanted to make sure that they were all safe and at home. <br>

> What was worse was that in her haste she had managed to spoil some of the ingredients for the spell. The phone call to Anya to tell her the bad news had not been a good one. The girl had only managed to calm down when Willow had promised to perform the spell at the first opportunity in the morning. <br>

> She hurried through the halls to the computer room where she could safely do the spell. Originally she had hoped to do it in the science room but time was a factor now. She had to get this done before the janitor did final rounds and the staff started coming in.<br>

> Willow ran the last few feet with that thought in her head and smacked open the door. Anya was already waiting inside with a pout on her face. She got up from her seat and started to clear a space on the floor. It only took a few minutes to get the circles drawn and the minor protections in line.<br>

> Anya was elated at the prospect of regaining her abilities and wrecking havoc on the people who had reduced her to this pitiful existence. Since she had cast the spell that would give Cordelia her wish, the emotions that she had been feeling were causing her great trouble and giving her no small amount of fear. And the greatest fear was that she was now at the wrong end of the demon food chain. Yeah, so a vengeance demon isn't the most powerful in the legions of the demonic host but they held their own. <br>

> The two girls knelt on the floor and started to incant the spell. Willow felt the magic build and felt her perceptions change. Images started to flit past her too quickly to comprehend. As Anya began to take her pivotal roll in the ceremony she flinched when the emotional

content of the magic hit her. She spilled the summoning cup and it's contents over Willow's hand and the spell ended in a crash. <br>  
> Willow managed to shake off her daze quickly. Anya was worse off and kept shaking her head but Willow paid her no attention. She had only around half an hour to clean up the crap that was all over the floor. Running to the cupboard in the corner she wrenched it open and grabbed the brush and scoop that she kept there for such an emergency. Anya was up a few seconds later and started to shout at her.<br>

> "We didn't complete the spell. We have to try again. I need that locket."<br>

> She made to grab the brush from Willow's hand but she didn't have the strength or the balance to pull it off. Willow, totally out of character, just snarled at her.<br>

> "Do you want to explain to Snyder about this, or Buffy?"<br>

> Anya shut up and moved out of the way. Once the floor was free of the dust, Willow stuffed the candle and the cup into the teacher's desk and they both moved the chairs back into place. <br>

> Now Willow could kid herself that nothing had happened.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Joe woke when an alarm started to shriek from somewhere below him. It took a couple of seconds for sense and reason to penetrate the alcoholic haze but when he recognised what the screech stood for he bounded down the stairs to the work benches. <br>

> Flipping open a latch on a small container, Josephus took out a small stand made of circular tiers. With five tiers in all and a number of crystals in each tier, it glowed brightly with multicoloured lights. Pressing his hand down on the large flat crystal on the topmost tier, he started to chant.<br>

> "First, direct. Second, measure. Third, divine. Fourth, deduce. Fifth, focus."<br>

> As each sentence was spoken, each tier responded. The first tier, the largest with thirty-six crystals, glowed until all but one went out. The second tier began to glow and it's twenty-four crystals dimmed to half their original brightness. The third tier's ten crystals turned an electric blue. Joe's even breathing changed into a sigh as he recognised the glow.<br>

> \* Temporal fold. \*<br>

> The fourth tier was the most puzzling. It's lights kept pulsing between pitch black and pure white. He waited for the fifth and final tier. Gazing into the mirror flat surface he made out two, no three faces in all. The only problem was that two of the faces were identical with one difference. When the crystal showed the first twin's face, the crystals on the fourth tier were white and the second twin turned them black. The white meant human and innocent while the black suggested demon, most probably vampire. He gave up on the third face when the crystals kept flickering. <br>

> Joe stepped back and scratched his head in wonder. The crystal showed either the past or future to within ten minutes of the present time and was pretty much on the ball with queries on the present. What he had asked for was what he got, the present.<br>

> \* Oh, fuck this shite. It's too early for any heavy thinking. \* <br>

> Joe went back up the stairs and reset his alarm. He'd give himself another three hours and then he'd start the new approach.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> He looked like a changed man. With his hair brushed back, a good suit and a pair of Ray-Ban's he looked like he had just come off an

all night binge of alcohol and was just trying to pass himself off as sober. At least that was the way that Emer had described him before he had left. At least he didn't smell like a two-week-old corpse any more. He would have smelt worse but the phone tapping had hit pay dirt when he had heard the Mayor ask Faith to collect Rayne.<br>  
> With her help they had created a quick believable background for him to use at the school. A quick look at the archives in the local newspaper had turned up a connection between the Family and the town, and a couple of more minutes on the phone had given him a background that was almost permanently reliable.<br>  
> Joe walked up the stairs to the school and tried not to wince as the light stabbed him in the eyes. Regretting that he hadn't worn the heavier shades he kept going towards the school secretary's office. He hit paydirt well short of the mark. An offensive little man stepped out of a doorway and into his path.<br>  
> "Can I help you before I call security?"<br>  
> Joe resisted the urge to hit him. Instead he gave the man a predatory smile and darted his hand into his jacket. His smile grew as he pulled out his hand with a card in it. The little man had stepped back into the doorway and given off a palpable aura of fear when Joe's hand had moved.<br>  
> "My name is Archer Dale of Barton Cole Antiquities. We opened a branch here almost two months ago and your Mayor was very kind in opening the branch for us. He was kind enough to also say that if we needed anything we could just call him."<br>  
> The Principle took the card and pawed it about until the Mayor was mentioned. Then the card seemed to develop a value and was put into a pocket. Some sort of smile graced the troll's mouth.<br>  
> "What can we do for you?"<br>  
> Joe held up his hand and displayed a metal briefcase. <br>  
> "The company managed to acquire an estate's library and we came across a book that we are very interested in. We need to establish a provenance and discovered that you have one of the foremost members of the bibliophilic world working here in the school."<br>  
> The troll's face twisted into a grimace.<br>  
> "Oh yes. Mister Giles. Rupert Giles."<br>  
> Joe nodded his head and decided to go for the coupe de grace.<br>  
  
> "If there is a problem with this I am sure that we can clear it with the Mayor."<br>  
> The Principal gestured towards a double door not too far down the hall. <br>  
> "Go through those doors and go to the end of the corridor. Take the second left and the library is the first set of doors after the stairs on the right. I can't escort you but you should have no problems. I have some work to do with the herd...children."<br>  
> Joe nodded, thanked the little shit and walked away before he changed his mind about hurting him. He knew that thirty seconds after he was gone his name would be passed on to the Mayor and wheels would turn. They would find that an Archer Dale was indeed working for Barton Cole but the branch couldn't contact him at the moment. Most of their reps would be on the road either verifying the provenance of finds or trying to acquire new ones. The Mayor would say thank you and hang up. End of story.<br>  
>It helps when the Family own businesses like Barton Cole. Every now and then identities were helpful.<br>  
>Joe stopped outside the library door and looked inside through the small glass panels. He caught a glimpse of movement in the office attached to the larger room. He decided to go for it. <br>  
>The Pale Man stepped in and gave the door a gentle shove. As it

closed it gave an audible clack that caught the attention of whoever was inside the office. Joe heard books shut and a drawer close before a voice came from inside. <br>

>"Can I help you?"<br>

>The Watcher came out a few seconds later, limping slightly. He turned to see his visitor and Joe caught sight of the side of Giles' face where he had hit the wall. He winced and saw that Giles had caught the reaction but didn't seem to recognise him.<br>

> "Mister Giles, I presume."<br>

> Joe gave a little smile at the joke and saw the librarian mouth twitch in response. Giles gave a little nod and reached out his hand.<br>

> "Rupert Giles. How can I help you."<br>

> "Archer Dale of Barton Cole Antiquities. We discovered this in an estate sale only two hundred miles from here and we wondered if you could verify its origins."<br>

> Joe put his briefcase on the counter and opened it to reveal a heavily padded package. With careful slow movements Joe unwrapped a small but thick book. Its cover was a dark stained leather. Handing it slowly over to the librarian, Joe stepped back to let him work. Giles opened the book carefully and concentrated on the slow process that was authenticating an antique. <br>

> As the librarian leaned over the book, Joe took the first few seconds to do what he needed. Palming the small flat box from his pocket he removed a protective strip and stuck the listening device in under the lip of the main worktop. He would have liked to get further into the room but it would be impossible without getting caught. Keeping his eye on Giles he hit a switch on the bug, removed his hand and waited.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Giles was fascinated. The book seemed to be a copy of some lost works by Francis Bacon. If true this copy could fetch several million dollars in any respectable auction. Lifting the book carefully Giles went to the main desk and sat down. Almost absentmindedly he gestured to his guest to sit across from him. He poured over the book and failed to notice the man put his hand under the desk and leave it there for a second. He looked up for a second and was blinded by the glare from the window behind Dale. A frown flit across his face before he went back to his book. Something was puzzling him. Before he could open his mouth a buzzer sounded and he heard doors slam open in the hall beyond his library.<br>

> Buffy wandered into the library to have a word with Giles. They had heard about Ethan's death and the shooting of Faith hours after the fact and she was worried. Ever since the attack on Giles she had been presented with situations that she really didn't know how to deal with. The police had questioned Giles informally about Ethan and he had given them the story that he had stayed overnight and that his bruises were due to a fall down the stairs after a few drinks with his friend. The story had worked.<br>

> She let the door go and looked up from the floor to see Giles sitting across from his attacker. Her face hardened and she saw the shock on Giles face when she moved towards his guest. Giles' shock disappeared when he recognised the silhouette that Dale cast with the window behind him.<br>

> Joe realised his game was up when he saw the Slayer come in. For one second he thought it was a set-up when he realised that the girl went to school here. He stood up quickly and stepped away from the chair. The girl, Buffy, kept coming at him. He stopped her with a raised hand.<br>

> "I've seen your school record and if you get caught doing anything

on school ground you're expelled."<br>

> It stopped Buffy in her tracks for all of a second. She reached out to grab the stranger's jacket and he caught her hand in a hard grip. She was shocked at the level of strength that he had. Normally, if anyone else tried to stop her the situation would be 'Resistance is Futile'. She stopped pushing and stepped back but balled her hands into fists to let the stranger know that she could start swinging at a moment's notice.<br>

> "Start talking."<br>

> "I'm here to retrieve some stolen property and nothing else."<br>

> Joe pointed to Giles.<br>

> "I visited you for one reason only. On a very short list of names associated with Ethan Rayne, yours featured as the only one not on a gravestone. And when I found out that you were a Watcher, I felt that violence was called for."<br>

> Buffy chimed in with her two cents.<br>

> "And you don't have a good history with the Watchers?"<br>

> Joe smiled at the girl.<br>

> "I'm sure that the good Mister Rayne gave you a complete rundown on the Pale Man and his cohorts. No need for me to fill in the gaps."<br>

> "So you were the one who killed..."<br>

> "I didn't kill him. I just called by the house and before I could do anything painful and completely irreversible, he ran right through your window and into the path of a car. And it really breaks my heart."<br>

> Joe smirked. The death of the thief had in no way affected him. From all accounts Rayne had been an absolute soulless bastard and deserved the shit kicking that he was going to get in Hell. And then Buffy hit him with the bombshell.<br>

> "And what about Faith?"<br>

> Joe leaned forward and looked her in the eye. Now the little cow had pissed him off.<br>

> "What about her? She pulled a knife on me. In any court of law shooting her was self-defence and nothing else. But I severely doubt that the Mayor would see it that way."<br>

> Giles and Buffy looked shocked.<br>

> "What do you mean?"<br>

> Joe looked at them. Then it hit him. They actually didn't know that Faith was working for the Mayor. Now it was decision time. If he told them then he could get involved in the little fight that seemed to be going on here. But if he did he could get the books back in seconds. He went for half way.<br>

> "I'll tell you what I know for a price. The books."<br>

> Buffy turned to Giles and raised her eyebrows in question. Her former Watcher was not happy at the prospect of losing the books. That could yield untold knowledge about the Slayer and the Watchers. Information that could be crucial to them sometime in the future. But they had to know anything they could about the Mayor and his possible new ally. Giles got up and went into his office. A few seconds later he was out and he gave the books to Buffy.<br>

> She flicked through the books for herself, looking at the contents for the first time. She looked up at the man and a question came to mind.<br>

> "What's your name?"<br>

> "Joe."<br>

> "Well Joe, here are your books."<br>

> She gave them to him and for the first time since they had been stolen, Joe relaxed. He gave Buffy and Giles a grateful smile and



gave them what they wanted. And a little more.<br>

> "I have a phone tap on most of the Mayor's telephones. I have two recordings that you would be interested in. The first is between the Mayor and Rayne. The second of the calls is the Mayor's secretary relaying an instruction for her to meet Rayne at your house. There are a few others but they deal with day to day running of the city."<br>

> He decided to go out on a limb. As much as he wanted to leave Sunnydale he wanted to help this girl.<br>

> "Before I leave, I'll give you some gear that will let you keep permanent tabs on the Mayor. It's basic but it should help."<br>

> Giles took the gesture for what it was and decided to take a chance.<br>

> "Do you know what an Ascension is?"<br>

> What the librarian got wasn't what he had expected. Joe's face went pale to the point of pure white and then smoothed out. His shoulders straightened and his hair darkened to a matt black. His voice changed to an emotionless tone.<br>

> "Explain."<br>

> Buffy had taken a step back when Joe's face had changed. All her instincts were screaming at her to run but she couldn't. Giles was pretty much the same but his fear changed to an awe that was almost palpable. A second later the skintone changed back and an ordinary looking man was again in front of them<br>

> "We have heard a rumour that the Mayor is trying to do something associated with an Ascension. We haven't been able to find anything on it in all our archives, either here or at the Watcher headquarters."<br>

> Joe was thinking hard. He was over a thousand years old and had the memories for nine times that amount. In all that time he could recall hearing of only a handful of Ascensions. This changed everything. He put the books down on the table and sat back into his chair. It only took him a couple of minutes to get to a decision.<br>

> "I need to get some things. Is there some place safe that we can talk?"<br>

> Giles made to mention the library but with Wesley coming in at night to consult with his Slayer it might attract too much attention to have another adult come to the school. Joe solved his dilemma.<br>

> "I'll give you my address. Park your car a block away and walk the rest. The area I live in isn't residential so a lot full of cars will attract too much attention."<br>

> He grabbed a piece of paper from the desk and scribbled out the address of The Palace. Handing it to Giles, Joe grabbed his books and threw them into his briefcase. Almost as an afterthought he went back to the desk and removed the bugging device he had planted. Buffy gave him an odd look when she saw the little black box and he shrugged.<br>

> "Until a few minutes ago I didn't know which side of the fence you were on. Now that I do, I don't need these."<br>

> He turned to Giles and pointed at the book he had brought in with him.<br>

> "I already know that it is authentic. Did the verification myself about fifteen years ago. Keep it with you until this evening, it makes for good reading."<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Snyder took the card out of his pocket and gave the name and the business a good look. The business was legitimate, he had been there himself. But orders were orders. Snyder walked down the hall towards his office, taking his mobile phone out as he made the journey.

Turning his head constantly to keep a watch for anyone trying to overhear he hit speed-dial and got an answer on the first ring.<br>

> "How can I help you, Principal Snyder?"<br>

> "You told me to keep an eye out for visitors. We have one from Barton Cole Antiquities, an Archer Dale. He's here to verify some artefact with the help of the librarian."<br>

> There was a pause on the other end of the line. Snyder began to sweat with the wait. All he could hear was tapping and a low murmur for several seconds. <br>

> "The name does check out. You did your part now we do ours."<br>

> The call was disconnected. Snyder gave a small smile at the thought that somewhere, something was going on that could remove Buffy Summers and her crew from his life forever.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Joe left the school at a quick trot. There was one good thing about going through the full transformation to the Pale Man, even for a few minutes: he had burnt off the last of the hangover. He got into the car and drove as quickly as he could for The Palace. He needed to get the few bits and pieces of information he had ready and he needed a lot more from home. He stopped the car quickly and got out, stopping only to hit the alarm.<br>

> Emer was inside, running over the results from the sewer monitors and the phone taps. As soon as Joe was in the door she grabbed his arm to show him some results.<br>

> "We have a problem. My Dad rang to say something about the Mayor and the Ascension. If you need to talk to him hit speed dial and seven. I did a check on the Watcher link and they have nothing. I called the Family Archive and they are e-mailing over copies of The Mertef Codex and The Almini Writings under code."<br>

> Joe nodded on hearing the two names. He had read through them looking for some data on a demon he had fought in the sixteenth century and come across the phrase Ascension. He gave Emer a smile and thanked her for her good work. He stepped over to the phone and called her father. Within seconds he had the story of what the Mayor had said in the hospital. <br>

> "You need to come here now and pick up Emer. There is to be no contact between us until further notice." <br>

> This was not good. He had come to Sunnydale and walked into an Ascension. He had caught the end of one in the<br>twelfth century somewhere in the back end of nowhere. It had been a difficult fight but using the memories of previous Pale Men had given him the necessary edge to defeat the Soul-Ripper. The prospect of running into one in a town this size was not good. By the time the fight was over, whatever the outcome, at least two-thirds of the population would be dead.

><br>\* Not good at all. \*

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The Mayor sat back to think. A visitor for the Watcher, or former Watcher as Faith had told him, was not good. With so little time left until the Ascension an unknown variable such as the Pale Man and this visitor was a problem. He lifted a surveillance photo taken outside the school. The light had been perfect and his man had caught a good profile of this visitor. The Principal had reported nothing out of ordinary about this visitor. Average in height, weight and young looking. Snyder hadn't even picked up a discernible accent. His surveillance had led to the man's work place or home and then they had got lucky.

><br> The last few photographs showed a middle-aged man picking up

his daughter from in front of the place. The man known as Archer Dale was watching them from inside the doorway and only closed the door when they were well out of sight. A few calls and inquiries had uncovered James Doherty, prominent banker and devoted family man. More calls had turned up the fact that the home was registered in the name of a holding company that was owned by the people Rayne had stolen from.

><br>A buzzer sounded from his desk. Pressing the button on the intercom, he answered the secretary's call.

><br> "Yes, Miss Kellner?"

><br> "Miss Faith is here to see you."

><br> The Mayor's face lit up with a smile as he got up to open the door to his office. His secretary beat him to the punch as he came around the desk. He stopped and his smile dimmed a bit as his Slayer, his little girl limped into the office. He stepped forward and helped her sit down.

><br> "How are you doing, Faith?"

><br> Faith looked up to her 'boss' and smiled. Despite her injuries he could see that her accident hadn't dimmed the fire in her one little bit.

><br> "I'll be all right, boss. The Docs say that the limp should be gone in a day or two. I have painkillers if it gets worse. Did you get anything on...?"

><br> The Mayor stopped her and reached across the desk to grab a couple of the photographs. He went through them quickly and picked the best one of 'Archer Dale' and gave it to her. The confirmation that Dale and the Pale Man were one in the same came when Faith slammed her hand down on the armrest of her chair and cracked it. He frowned. Even though she was walking around with an injury that could paralyze an ordinary person she was still in some pain. He needed to distract her.

><br> "I have a little present for you."

><br> He went behind his desk and took out a box of dark heavy wood. Putting it gently on the desk in front of her he couldn't help but start to smile at the transformation. The Faith that had come in the door disappeared as the child in her took over. She ripped open the box and folded back the paper protecting its prize. Her face became awed as she lifted free a cruel looking knife.

><br> "It's a thing of beauty, boss."

><br> "Only the best for my Faith."

><br>He started to giggle and then stopped.

><br>"If you're up to it I have a little job for you."

><br>Riffling through the photos again he came to the one of the two Dohertys and their car. And then he stopped.

><br>"I was going to give this job to you for tomorrow night but I think it could attract the wrong sort of attention. I'll have some of the boys take care of it. What I need you to do is a little pickup tonight. An informant has given me the address of an individual who might have some books on the Ascension. If you could go over and pick them up I'd be most appreciative."

><br>He gave his little girl his best smile.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Less than two hours after the Dohertys had left Joe received his visitors. When he opened the door he found Buffy directly in front of him and her friends behind her. Joe only knew two of the Scooby Gang, Giles and Buffy herself, so he was wary of the other five with them. Buffy nodded towards the inside of his place and he nodded back.

><br> \* Best to ask any questions inside. \*

><br> They came in slowly. Getting a good look around the large room. Joe saw the red haired girl's eyes linger on the electronic equipment that Emer had been tending to only a few hours before. Giles' and the other adult's eyes went to the small pile of books on a table. Joe's radar lit off when he looked over the second man's smart suit but got side tracked when two of his guests started to bicker.

><br> Seeing that the bickering was probably going to get on everyone's nerves, Buffy decided to introduce everyone to their newfound ally.

><br> "Joe. This is Willow and Oz-"

><br> Buffy gestured to the red headed girl and her silent friend. From the way that they stood together Joe guessed that they were a pair. He turned and caught the end of her introduction.

><br> "- Zander, Cordelia and you know Giles."

><br> Joe looked at the last of the group and again guessed something about one of them. This guy was an asshole. Grade A and fully matured into the ranks of Asshohedom. The guy in question stepped forward and held out his hand.

><br> "Wesley Wyndam-Price at your service."

><br> Joe turned and walked back towards the centre of the room. Smiles were forced back at the insult to Wesley as they followed their host. He stopped beside the pile of books and handed each a few sheets of printed paper.

><br> "These are excerpts from the Mertef Codex. They explain in general terms that the Ascension is the change from human to demon form without losing your soul. It's a difficult and very dangerous process as you can see from the descriptions."

><br> Giles and Wesley were both pouring over the pages, reading as quickly as they could. They had both jumped when they had heard the name of the Codex but they kept their questions to themselves. Wesley raised his hand to speak.

><br> "Do you have any other points of reference?"

><br> Joe waved his hand in an offhand manner to downplay his next few words. He put a large bet on with himself over their reactions.

><br> "The Almini Writings, The Chronicles of Thunxaz and bits from a dozen others."

><br> Giles and Wesley were in awe. The first book was thought lost at least two thousand years ago but the second was unknown to them. Giles asked the question.

><br> "I'm not familiar with the Chronicles. Are they known by another name?"

><br> Joe picked up one of the books that he had taken back from Giles that morning. He turned to the front page and started to read.

><br> "I, Thunxaz, priest of the mighty Cthulthus, do write these simple words by his dictate. By his order this council is convened to aid the Slayer in her duties by our lives if necessary."

><br> He closed the book with a snap.

><br> "This was written about two years after the creation of the Slayers as far as we know. He sort of blathers on about sacred duty to a demonic master for the rest of the book. It's the next three volumes that have the original mandates of the Watchers. And before you ask, no you can't have them"

><br> Giles and Wesley were shocked by the declaration. With these books the Watchers would be able to retrace their history to before recorded history. From what they had heard so far the Watchers were assistants to the Slayer and nothing else but that. And the tone that the Pale Man had used showed that he knew what position the Watchers shared with their Slayers nowadays.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Buffy was getting tired of the Watcher talk. For as long as she had known the Watchers only treated her as a thing and not a person. As far as she was concerned they were good for information and little else. She threw the sheets of paper onto the table and waited for a few seconds before slapping her hand down on its surface.

><br> "We have to talk about stopping the Ascension not..."

><br> A loud banging started at the door. Joe ran to a locker and grabbed a crossbow from inside. Loading it with quick movements he moved sideways to the monitors and flicked a switch. A console screen came on and an image of the doorway outside came up. A girl with light coloured hair could be seen banging on the door, screaming out something. With a stifled curse Joe dropped the crossbow and ran to the portal. Pulling it open he reached out and grabbed the girl by the wrist. He pulled her in with a savage tug that threw her off balance. He took a quick look outside to see if anyone had taken notice of the screaming and then pulled his head back in.

><br> The girl was on the ground, looking up at him with anger in her eyes. He glanced at her face and then did a double take.

><br> "Anyanka."

><br> "The girl looked back and her anger faded.

><br> "Josephus."

><br> Joe looked at the girl again and a nagging feeling came over him. In a flash he had it. He looked to and from Willow and Anya and pointed a finger at them.

><br> "Did you two cast a spell lately? At about eight o'clock this morning."

><br> Anya looked away and Willow blushed a deep scarlet. Joe took that to be a confirmation of their guilt. Reaching down he helped Anya to her feet. Keeping a good hold of her he walked over to Willow and pushed her forward. He felt Buffy's hand try to grab his shoulder but he twisted it away before she could get a grip. He walked them quickly to a large mirror and stopped them there. Going to a cabinet marked crystal, he opened it and pulled several boxes out. Ignoring the one he had used just that morning, he took three others and opened them. A length of chain with inserts came out of the first box while a series of multicoloured crystals of uniform size came out of the other.

><br> He pushed the crystals into the inserts and draped the chain over the mirror. As he let the last link fall the mirror went opaque. He started to chant and Willow turned to listen to the words. He turned her back to face the shadowed surface. Seconds later the mirror cleared to show a dark place. A figure could be seen moving against the little light but nothing else. Joe cursed and took a fishing tackle box from the cabinet. Clawing it open with one hand he pulled two crystals free, one from a portion marked 'light' and another from 'divination'. Clutching them tightly for a minute, he threw them at the mirror.

><br> Willow watched in amazement as the crystals sailed through to land in the darkness beyond. A second later one of crystals started to glow a bright blue. Joe only muttered a word.

><br> "Vampire. About a four point five."

><br> The second crystal flashed a bright light that showed the face of the vampire. Everyone in the room gasped at the image of Willow. Except Zander who gasped at what she was wearing. The demon was going for the vamp look and had certainly hit the mark. They kept watching the scene unfold in front of them but could only watch in dismay as the image faded and the mirror returned to its reflective state.

><br> Joe was tired. Casting a spell of that power took a lot out of

him. He grabbed both of the girls of the forearms he spun them around and shouted at them.

><br> "What the hell did you do? I want to know now or I swear I will kick your arses from one side of this shithole town to the other."

><br> Anya spoke up.

><br> "I lost my amulet. I cast a vengeance spell for that one and it was destroyed in the other reality. I wanted it back."

><br> She pointed to Cordelia who looked angry for being blamed for something she didn't remember doing.

><br> "That's no bloody excuse. What you've done is set a fairly strong vampire on this town. One with enough strength to set up her own powerbase. And I just wasted a whole lot of scrying crystals to find her."

><br> Cordelia crossed her arms and gave Joe a defiant look. He ignored her and walked to the monitor station.

><br> The station itself held six screens, on large one surrounded by five smaller. A bank of signal receivers lay to one side while a large black computer was on the other. Joe sat in front of the station and pulled out a drawer with a keyboard on it. The gang walked up behind him while he tapped away and soon a map of the town sewer system came up with several coloured lights on it. A few more keystrokes and the lights extinguished one by one to leave the blue ones only. Joe turned around.

><br> "There are two possibilities but only one is giving the signal strength that equals this vampire. We have to deal with this vampire. I'll be a while -"

><br> Joe tapped the screen at a point in the map furthest from them.

><br> "-dealing with this."

><br> Buffy looked at the two locations. She recognised one as near the mansion that was Angel's home. And the other was the old factory that had been a vampire base for almost as long as she had been in Sunnydale. She pointed at it.

><br> "I'll go with you. Oz, can you go to the mansion with Willow."

><br> Willow understood the need to go to the mansion. If anything major was going down then Angel could play a very essential part. But she had to make something clear.

><br> "We can't kill her. It's me."

><br> Everyone looked at Willow in amazement. She continued.

><br> "We can't kill her. We can't!"

><br> Buffy was worried by the outburst but understood. She had become a vampire when their nightmares had fused with reality and she had seen the fear on her friend's faces. She knew that Willow wanted them to give this other Willow a chance at redemption. The Slayer gave the Pale Man a steely-eyed look.

><br> "Everyone has to have a chance to make things right."

><br> Joe looked right back at her.

><br> "Fine."

><br> He walked over to his weapons locker again and opened the doors fully. Beckoning Buffy over, he handed her some of his grenades and his only spare crossbow. She looked at the bombs and made to hand them back. He stopped her.

> <br> "If you come on a group of vampires these are good for cutting down the odds. Throw this switch and it pushes out a holy water mist. Any vampire will be in too much pain to stop you from killing it."

><br> He gave her a small black box with a belt-clip that reminded her of a beeper. He held it in front of her.

><br> "This is not a beeper. If you have a vampire within a hundred yards, a crystal in it will start to glow and set the beeper's vibration mode off. The nearer the vampire the harder the vibration. You have to do something though before you can use it."

><br> "What? Sacrifice a virgin? Pledge my allegiance to some demonic prince?"

><br> "You need batteries."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br>Five minutes later and the two demon hunters were on the way to the factory. There was no telling if the vampire would stay still while they were on route to the factory so Joe had been forced to show Zander and Cordelia how to use the sensor net. After five seconds he had been forced to ask Willow to stay and monitor the net.

><br>She had been quick to figure out that the sensors were more powerful versions of the beeper with for greater range. She was online even now and giving them constant updates on the vampires movements in the factory. Their worst problem would be if the demon got jumpy and decided to go into the sewers.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Buffy gave Joe a hard look. Every question that he had answered for the gang had only dredged up some more but one thing was very clear. He could be a great help in fighting the Mayor. And Faith. Buffy had to think about this. Faith was the way she was because everyone that she had depended on had either fucked her over or died. Except for one person and that was the Mayor. She couldn't think about this now. She had to deal with that issue later.

><br>"So what do we do when we get to the factory?"

><br>Joe gave Buffy an amused glance. It was not what he had expected. Most people would have hit him with the big question about living 'forever' but this Slayer seemed to be in the here and now.

><br>"We find this thing and drop it. If it gets to be too much of a problem we kill it."

><br>Buffy opened her mouth to respond to the killing bit but Josephus shushed her.

><br>"I know that your friend Willow doesn't want us to kill this thing but I find that vampires are generally better dead. What do you think?"

><br>The question caught Buffy off guard. She had to respond quickly.

><br>"Sure. The only good vampire is a dead vampire."

><br>Joe grinned at the cliché and then sprung the trap.

><br>"I'm glad to hear it. And I take it that you share the same feeling when you think about Angelus?"

><br>Shock was the least of the emotions that hit Buffy. Her eyes grew heavy with tears and Joe eased off.

><br>"I know a lot about Angelus. The last that was seen of him in Europe was little over century ago but accounts show sighting from later still. His last recorded kill was somewhere in Rumania and he disappeared. However, he was seen boarding a ship in Spain that was heading for America about ninety five years ago. So what happened?"

><br>Buffy gave him the story so quickly Joe almost couldn't follow it. The soul bit drew a quick snicker that died when Buffy gave him an angry stare. He decided to change the story.

><br>"Do you want to hear the story of the first Slayers?"

><br>"Slayers. Plural."

><br>"It was a yes or no question, Buffy."

><br>She nodded and bit her lip to stop asking questions.

><br>"There are three periods in human history that are pretty much ignored by the majority of humanity. The Demon War, The Banishing and The Flood. The Demon War was about a hundred and eighty years long and was pretty much an all out effort by humanity and the demons to wipe each other out. The Banishing was when the Elder Demons and the vast majority of the Noble demons got sent back to Hell, and the Flood was the demons' answer to the Banishing.

><br>Near the end of the war, the magi managed to construct a spell that would sever the link between Hell and Earth. The demons found out about this and tried to wipe out the city that harboured these magi. Another city was in the way and a troop of fifty magi was sent to bolster the defences. These magi were very powerful magicians and weren't heavy on ethics. As the demon army approached the leaders of the city sent out their army to meet their enemy in the field. You can sort of guess what happened. The human army got chewed up, spat out and stomped on. And the demons kept coming.

><br>The magi expected the demons to win that little battle and tried to use the time to create a warrior that could defeat a demon in hand to hand combat. But the human army was defeated too quickly. The magi saw this and sent out another army with magically given powers to stop them.

><br>The Slayers.

><br>What the magi did was heinous even by their own standards. Women in those days had no rights and with the army gone only the women, children and the magi were left. The magi took the unmarried girls, between fifteen and eleven years of age, and fused them with the powers stripped from a demon. They did this to about eight hundred of the girls and then sent them out at the demon army."

><br>"Why didn't they try and stop the magi?"

><br>"You have to understand the way things were then. Society had evolved so fast that we still lived in mud huts and yet had cities. We were savages but we had magic so advanced the technology of today is nothing. And we still had all of our old vices.

><br>Women were considered to be second class and many believed that. When these girls were given a chance to actually do something they took it. They went out and hit the demons as hard as they could. And got crucified. Of the eight hundred, seventy survived including the severely wounded. But they did their job. The magi had time to create their super warrior. The Pale Men.

><br>In the start there were two hundred of us. I say us because I have the memories of one of those two hundred. They strolled out of the city and hit the demons head on. They did their job and killed the demons but the city was damaged in the process. The few remaining Slayers were taken back to the city and were stripped of their abilities. But some couldn't be and were sentenced to death as possible threats. The Pale Men changed the magi's minds and used the Slayers as agents to spy on the demons.

><br>By the time the Banishing occurred, twelve of the Slayers were left. A middle class demon, Cthulthus, who sided with the magi was given control of the Slayers, in return for information. He used them to hunt down the few remaining demons that escaped the banishing. When Cthulthus found that he was losing the Slayers too quickly he decided to back off and let the girls into the general population and breed. Any female progeny would carry the possibility of being a Slayer in them. But Cthulthus was too busy to keep an eye on all the kids that came forth so he created the Watchers to train and assist the future Slayers. End of story."

><br>The story had silenced Buffy. Sort of.



><br>"You said that you have the memories of the Pale Men. What did you mean?"

><br>Joe decided to go with the honest option.

><br>"When a person becomes a Pale Man, they absorb the memories of the Pale Man they are replacing. And in their memories are the memories of all the Pale Men down to the first few."

><br>Joe could see that her mind was working in overdrive trying to process the information that he had given her. It was up to her to ask the next question. Joe concentrated on the driving and saw that they were almost at their destination. Stopping some distance from their target Joe made one final check.

><br>"Willow. What's the story?"

><br>Willow tapped a few keys and the monitor moved in on the blue dot. A few more taps and the girl had bad news.

><br>"Joe, the signal is moving to the south-east corner of the factory. There is only one thing near that point, a sewer entrance. If she goes in there she can choose a dozen different directions to go."

><br>Joe cursed and floored the accelerator. He was past the gate and within a hundred yards of the factory before Buffy could ask what was wrong. He shoved the radio to her and let Willow explain. He brought the jeep to a screeching halt and grabbed his weapons before diving out and into the factory. He was too late. An open sewer grating lay before him.

><br>"Buffy. Get back to the jeep and tell Willow what's happening. Run to the entrance of the industrial park and enter the sewers there. We'll get Willow to track her for us and we can vector in on her then. Move."

><br>He didn't wait for an answer, diving into the open pit.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe was disgusted. He had spent the better part of an hour looking for the demon and got sweet fuck all for his troubles. After jumping down the signal from Willow had been lost as he got farther and farther into the sewers. A close look at the walls showed him that a fair amount of lead and other crap had been pumped down here over the years. And without a signal he couldn't find the vampire. He decided to call it a day and trudged back to the entrance point he had used. His beeper started to shake. He started to run and changed direction each time he felt the vibrations fade. It took him only moments to guess the direction the demon was heading in and ran after it.

><br>The hunt took only a few minutes. He could see a figure running around the corners, seconds ahead of him. It wouldn't be long. Joe cocked his crossbow and turned the corner to fire at the fleeing vampire...and his beeper started to vibrate ten times harder.

><br>The vampire jumped from her hiding place and smashed the crossbow out of his hands. It hit the wall and the bolt landed in the filth. Swinging again, the demon Willow landed a couple of punches before he could do anything. Dazed from the attack he pulled one of the grenades and let it fall to the ground at his feet. It hissed into action and Alter-Willow turned to run as the mist started to burn her. Joe grabbed at her and only managed to knock her to the ground. The mist grew thick in the confined space of the sewer and the vampire screamed in pain as it started to burn. The Pale Man stood up as tall as he could and stepped up to finish the helpless demon with a spare crossbow bolt. It was only when he remembered the other Willow's plea that he changed his stab to a kick in the head to knock the vampire unconscious.

><br>Picking up his crossbow and reloading it, Joe had to decide how

to handle this. He opted for the simplest method. Reaching for the back of 'Willow's' neck he grabbed a hunk of material and dragged her through the filth. She wouldn't be happy when she woke up but at this stage Joe didn't give two shits what she would think.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The Pale Man arrived back at his home to find that his total of guests had increased by one. Buffy walked over to the newcomer and they started to speak in whispers. Joe trudged into the place and unceremoniously dumped his cargo on the floor. It twisted as it landed, shaking loose the blanket that had covered it from the light. The vampire sat up and tried to break the restraints but failed again for the twentieth time.

><br> The demon turned about when it heard the gasps of surprise and looked into it's own face. Willow, the living one, had stepped forward to look at her double and was shaken by what she saw. The shock showed in her face and the demon laughed. The Alter-Willow gave her 'twin' a leer and then morphed her face and lunged forward. Her jump was brought to a crashing halt as a kick in the side knocked her well off balance.

><br> Joe gave the demon a long hard look and smiled at her. She got the message and lay on the ground. That done Joe returned his gear to the weapons locker and then stepped forward to look at the new guest. And remembered him from the night he and Buffy had first 'met'.

><br> "Hello, Angelus."

><br> The vampire turned good stood up and looked Joe straight in the eye.

><br> "Have we met?"

> <br> "I've read about you. I'd say that Sylvester Stallone would have to do another ten Rambo movies to get a bodycount as big as yours. From what I've heard, you and some gypsies went one on one and you lost. True or false?"

><br> Angel looked uncomfortable at the mention of the bodycount and Joe picked up on the hostility in the room. He looked across at the gang and saw Giles and Zander giving the vampire angry looks. Well Giles was giving the vampire the look, Zander was too busy ogling the front of Alter-Willow's costume. Joe gave the entire gang a quick glance and saw a whole rainbow of emotions displayed. It didn't matter at the moment but at some time they would have to sort their shit out or they would screw up. Joe turned back to Angelus.

><br> "It's good to meet another Galwegian. You fancy a decent pint of Guinness?"

><br> Angel grinned and they shook hands. But he still had to ask the question.

><br> "What are you?"

><br> Joe knew that they would have talked over what they knew. Which was damn all. He needed to gain their trust so he gave them something.

><br> "I was born in nine hundred ten AD or thereabouts. Calendars weren't very accurate back then. We were living in what is now the site of Galway city and had the small fishing village thing going. You'd see the same sort of villages in remote areas on the Discovery channel. I wasn't great with the whole fishing thing so I left the first chance I could and became the servant of a nobleman who was on a pilgrimage to Rome. We were at the French side of the Alps when we were hit by a bunch of brigands who killed most of the pilgrims. What was left of the three hundred of us managed to get to safety. But it turns out that the nobleman is actually transporting a relic, a powerful one, to Rome for safekeeping.

><br>The nobleman, as soon as was able, sent off a messenger and

these guys who were fairly pale joined us. The nobleman grabs a few of his people, including myself, and we all run off after the thieves. We find them and the usual happened: a big kick-ass fight. At the end there was me, the nobleman and two of his guys. And of course the Pale Men. One of them calls me over and they have a little chat about my 'suitability'. The vote goes in my favour and two of them grab me and my arm is cut open and blood is mixed. Thirty seconds later I'm paler than a person who has to watch reruns of TJ Hooker."

><br> Joe smiled at his story. It was the first time in about thirty years that he had told it and it always got the same reaction: disbelief. He could feel the memories flood back. The memory of a Turning was always the easiest to recall.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The four had ridden in on horses that steamed with the exertion of a long and hard ride. As soon as they had stopped at the front of the nobleman's lodgings they were off the animals and into the warmth of the weather battered house. Cold and battered Josephus the stableboy, page and general handyman wrestled the tired horses into what passed for the stables. Taking off their saddles and rubbing the beasts down with hay seemed to take forever. With that done the boy joined his 'master' in the house.

><br> He found the nobleman, a minor earl, retelling the tale of the ambush. Josephus himself remembered it differently. The attackers had hit the rear of the pilgrims' train and drawn off a good portion of the guards. The main body of the bandits hit seconds late, showering the convoy with arrows and dropping people in lumps of agony. Men on foot had rushed in and focused on one wagon, cutting down anyone who was in their way and looked to be capable of retaliation. He himself had grabbed a fallen sword and hidden behind one of the end wagons with some terrified survivors.

><br> By the time the guards returned from their ambush with half their number dead and more wounded the convoy had been stripped of the relic. In all only seventy managed to survive the attack and more died on the way to the nearest village. It would have been smarter to go back and quicker but in the end thirty five of us got to a little village on the very edge of Italian soil.

><br> Using his gold, the Earl had sent two of his most senior men onto Rome by boat and then we had waited. The better part of a week passed by before the boat returned with the men on board. The return message was short: help was coming. The men had arrived two days later. Josephus was disappointed. He had thought that the help would be a troop of hardened cavalry, not four skinny men with half-dead horses. But the Earl was ecstatic and welcomed them with open arms.

><br> Josephus could guess what was coming next. The sword he had was a short piece of iron roughly sharpened by a stone used to keep the blades on farming tools. The weather cleared and the remaining guards, the Earl and his guests trooped off. And Josephus was along as the stablehand.

><br> It took them two days to find the bandits and ten minutes to kill them. Everyone, including Josephus had run down the side of the hill above the raider's encampment and into the attackers. The four pale men were as if joined at the hip, moulded into a single unit. They didn't shout or scream to distract or release their fears but relied on speed and vicious, brute force. They killed over half of the raiders and didn't get a single mark in the process.

><br> The same couldn't be said of the rest. The Earl stayed inside the core of his bodyguard while the rest of us milled around among the raiders. Before long he managed to get into a fight with a raider

about his size and the flailed at each other. The raiders sword was easily twice Josephus' and too large for him to use safely. It nicked the stableboy's arm twice and he grew angry. After the next swing he jumped inside the others reach and swung his own sword into the raider's chest breaking the blade against the armour.

><br> The blow knocked the young raider off balance and the large sword slipped from his hand. Josephus grabbed it and swung, killing the boy instantly. With his berserker rage up Josephus ran at a group of raiders approaching the pale men from behind and cut one down before they knew it. Two turned back to deal with him while the rest continued on. Neither of the two groups got far. Alerted by Josephus' scream, they turned and attacked the last of the raiders and killed them. Of the two who had faced Josephus, one was dead to a lucky blow and the other was too distracted by the approach of the pale men to defend.

><br> Josephus took stock of the dead around him. There were eight of them left standing from the forty-two men who had started the attack, including the four strange men. The raiders were dead or severely wounded to a man, a hundred and ten of them. The nobleman and his two remaining bodyguards were going through the raider's booty to find the relic and killing any survivors they came across. Josephus wasn't surprised. If the raiders were taken back to a magistrate they would be sentenced and then made well enough for execution. Better they died this way.

><br> Josephus turned his attention back to the pale man. They were talking in a language unfamiliar to the stablehand and were pointing at him every few seconds. He was beckoned over.

><br> He was used to the whims of the nobility and went. He was probably going to have to count the raiders they had killed to determine the outcome of a wager: who had killed the most.

><br> "How old are you boy?"

><br> The voice of the man asking him was harsh and tinged with a guttural accent. Giving the man a quick once over to see if he was a 'boy-lover' Josephus answered.

><br> "Fifteen, sire."

><br> The largest of the four looked to the one who asked the question.

><br> "Old enough."

><br> Another started in with the strange language again, angrily gesturing to him.

><br> "I've made my choice. Respect it."

><br> Josephus saw the three nod at the first speaker and then they moved. Two grabbed his arms and held him straight as the speaker bared his arm. He took a simple skinning knife from his belt and pulled back the sleeve of his vest. He bared the boy's arm and placed the two together. Putting the knife in between the arms he turned it and pulled the knife the length of his forearm. Josephus screamed as the knife bit deep and the blood fountained out. He weakened in seconds and felt himself slip into darkness.

><br> Before he could pass out another pain hit him. A torrent of flashes hit his eyes and he shut them. They kept coming and he groaned with the pain. The flashes slowed and Josephus could see them for what they were.

><br> Memories.

><br> The pain stopped and he opened his eyes. The two men who held him let go and gave him warm smiles. Before he could ask their names were in his head. The taller was Rufio, the smaller Joshua. He looked at his arm and saw the wound heal as his flesh turned pale to an almost bone white.

><br> A gasp of fear and surprise brought him out of the daze. The

Earl, his former lord and master, was looking him with something approaching veneration. It disgusted Josephus and that surprised him. He turned away and looked at the one who had shared his blood with him. Dolph, a former Viking, was lying on the ground recovering. The last of the four, Marcus, was kneeling beside Dolph's head and waiting for him to come around. Marcus looked up at Josephus and smiled.

><br>"Welcome to the Family."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe shook his head and got back to the matters at hand. If things got really bad he could call on the other Pale Men for help but he wanted to respect their 'retirement'. Dolph had died not long after he had given Joe his Pale Man's 'essence', if you call sixty years not long. Dolph had been a Pale Man for the shortest length of time out of all the Pale Men. Only a hundred and twenty years. The four Pale Men had split and gone their separate ways but always kept in contact. Since the late nineteenth century the others had toned down their demon hunting and settled in countries around the world, well out of sight of inquisitive people.

><br>What mattered now was Alter-Willow. The vampire was testing her bonds again and failing again. It was the demon in her that needed to be unrestrained. Seeing that it couldn't get free it started on the taunts.

><br>"Zander. Come here and untie me and we can have some fun. Even better, don't untie me and we can have even more fun."

><br>The demon laughed as Zander looked away. Joe could see that the taunt had hit home in the boy, as well as in Willow and the girl called Cordelia.

><br>\*This has to stop. \*

><br>Joe stepped forward and kicked the demon in the side of the head, knocking her unconscious. The gang turned away, uncomfortable by the violent act. The Pale Man shrugged and slammed his hand down on the nearby table to get their attention.

><br>"Wesley, Giles. Get your thieving Watcher hands off the Chronicles and get over here. Thank you."

><br>The two men put down the books that they had been looking over and rejoined their companions. Joe waited until they were

><br>"We have to decide on what's going to happen to Miss Personality here. Well actually, you have to decide. My plant needs some grit for drainage and she's it if you don't decide now."

><br>The vampire had managed to regain consciousness moments before and caught the last few words. She struggled against the bonds again. Hearing the contempt in the Pale Man's voice she swung her legs and hit him behind the knees. The reaction she got horrified her.

><br>Instead of him falling, the man swung his head and looked her straight in the eye. The change was gradual but profound. All the pigment drained away and the little colour left in his eyes and hair darkened to an absolute black. All emotion seemed to drain from him as he bent down and grabbed the vampire by the throat. Lifting her off the ground with one hand he threw her against the wall behind her and started to slap her face.

><br>The slaps were powerful but not enough to knock her out, just enough to shake her head and cause pain. After the first five her mouth started to bleed and the trail of blood from the corner of her lips was smeared across her face. The next five rose higher, hitting across her eyes and nose. The last slap brought a trickle of blood from her nostril to mingle with the raw mess that was her lips. He grabbed her by the throat again.

><br>"You will not do that again."

><br>The vampire was truly scared. The Master had turned her and tamed her to suit his needs. And when one tames a vampire one shows it terror. And nothing the Master had done would equal this. She nodded to the Pale Man and went limp. If he let go she would fall and hurt herself more and she wanted the Pale Man to know that. He nodded back.

><br>"Stand. Do not move from that spot."

><br>Joe walked away from the vampire and over to his weapons locker. He pulled out crossbow and loaded it. The vampire looked at him with abject terror in his eyes as he walked forward. He put a quiver full of crossbow bolts on the ground in front of her and aimed the 'bow. Squinting over the sights he stopped.

><br>"If you open your mouth with a smart comment, a lie or anything I don't like I shoot bolts into you. And I guarantee that I can empty the entire quiver into your body without finishing you. Is that understood?"

><br>The vampire's response was quiet.

><br>"Yes."

><br>The colour returned to Joe's face as he smiled.

><br>"Good girl."

><br>He put the crossbow down by his side and turned to the gang again.

><br>"You made your mind up yet?"

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The gang was deadlocked. Everyone had opted out on what to do with the vampire. Willow was the only one who had anything to say.

><br> "We have to do the curse again. I can do this. Please."

><br> Giles responded as best he could.

><br> "Willow. Are you sure about what you are saying? I am aware that you are going through an emotional time but you have to take account of the dangers..."

><br> "I know the problems we had with the spell the last time but we can do it. I can do it."

><br> "You're not doing anything to me. I want to go home. It's no fun here."

><br> They looked at the vampire. She hadn't moved from where Joe had left her but she had heard everything they said. Joe gave a cynical laugh at the vampire's statement and raised his crossbow. Willow remembered his threat and stepped between him and the demon. He dropped it again. She begged him.

><br> "We have to do something."

><br> Joe snorted and sat down.

><br> "Like what."

><br> Willow looked at the Scooby Gang and got a nod from Buffy.

><br> "We have a curse, the same one used on Angel, that can return a vampire's soul..."

><br> Joe started to laugh and Alterna-Willow started to struggle. She stopped when he raised his crossbow and shot a bolt into the wall by her head.

><br> "Shit. Missed."

><br> Joe gave Willow a curious look.

><br> "Do you know that if you tried that spell, it could rip your soul from your body and use it? Sit down."

><br> Joe moved a chair in front of his and Willow took it.

><br> "When a demon takes over a human body the soul is detached. It goes to Hell if the person voluntarily comes across, or it goes to Limbo or Heaven if it's not voluntary. A soul is like a key and that key fits the body it comes from. A demon is like a blob that can copy

a key but not perfectly. Any soul can dislodge its control. Your curse, and I am familiar with it, calls a recently severed soul to fill the void left by the first. The problem is that it searches all the local souls including ones still attached to bodies. And yours fits the bill perfectly."

><br> Willow looked down at the floor and started to cry. Buffy ran forward with Oz and cradled her in her arms. Joe sat back and started to think.

><br>\*I was always a sucker for a damsel in distress. \*

><br>Joe got up and went to his crystal locker. Taking out his crystal-divining stand he twisted free the top crystal. Holding it in one hand he grabbed a smaller crystal from the locker. He took a small blade from his pocket and walked over to the scantily dressed vampire.

><br>"Remember what I said about giving me trouble?"

><br>He cut her bonds and waited for some stupidity to come forth. It didn't. He held the crystal out and gave it to the vampire. She got the hint and took it from him, holding it carefully.

><br>"With the help of Dumb and Dumber there-"

><br>Joe pointed at the two girls who had conjured the vampire from her world.

><br>"-I can send you back within the next ten minutes. And this crystal can tell you what will happen if you do go back."

><br>He placed his hand on it and let out a hiss. The crystal glowed and the vampire stared into her future. And screamed at what she saw. Joe caught the crystal before it could hit the floor. He looked at the vampire and saw that, given the alternative she had seen, she was going to make trouble. He surprised her.

><br>"I have a present for you. I'm giving it to you with absolutely no conditions, costs or anything. It's yours if you want it."

><br>Joe depended on the one basic characteristic that all vampires share apart from the need for blood: greed. Her hands darted out and cupped in front of her. And Joe obliged by dropping it in her hands. An Orb of Theusaleh. A glowing one. The stone stayed solid for all of a second and then flared brightly before vanishing. Willow's eyes flashed and she took in a massive gulp of air. Her face crumpled into grief as the memories of a thousand deaths at her hands. She gave out one sob and collapsed.

><br>"Well. That's that. You happy."

><br>He looked at Willow and saw the empathy, anger and surprise clash on her face. Giles stepped forward.

><br>"What did you do?"

><br>"I did exactly what Willow wanted. I gave her a soul. A very permanent one."

><br>Giles shook his head in disbelief.

><br>"But how? We searched for a curse and couldn't find one with anything approaching that kind of power. Even the spell that Jenny found was temporary."

><br>Joe frowned at the unfamiliar name but didn't ask. He saw the flare of grief on the Watchers face and the evil eye he gave Angel.

><br>\*Another problem that would have to be sorted out. \*

><br>"I suppose you would never cop on to a bit of common sense. If you really want to make someone absolutely miserable, bless them."

><br>He got eight blank stares. He decided to try small syllables.

><br>"Curses have conditions. If. But. Blessings have no conditions. Angel's soul was put in place to torment him, not to restore him as a

useful member of society. Now do you understand?"

><br> Buffy walked to the cabinet and pulled out a box that was marked 'Souls'. It held a dozen small boxes each containing an Orb of Theusaleh. She grabbed one and ran her fingers over it.

><br> "Why doesn't it glow?"

><br> "You're alive. You have a soul"

><br> Buffy kept running her fingers over the Orb. She stopped and looked straight at Joe.

><br> "Can you use one of these on Angel?"

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Angel could see his salvation only a few feet away. A little crystal orb, so fragile and yet powerful enough to hold an essence that would repulse even an Elder Demon. He took it from Buffy. It flared brightly, a white light that lit up his face.

><br>"What do we have to do?"

><br>"What's this we shit, paleface? As far as I know that's something that you and a certain someone have to discuss."

><br>Buffy's face went a bright crimson. Joe started to snicker and then laughed out loud. The evil look that Buffy gave him only made him laugh harder. Zander, Oz and Willow turned away and they started to shake with suppressed laughter. Giles smiled but didn't laugh outright. He may not like the vampire but the joke that Joe had pulled was too good. Buffy cuffed him lightly on the arm and he turned to face her.

><br>"When can you be ready to do the spell?"

><br>"You saw me do it to her. It takes all of ten seconds but there can't be a soul in the body for it to work. And it's not going to happen now. We need to be focused on the Ascension, not on your need for a quick shag."

><br>Buffy threw down the box and went for the Pale Man. Angel put his hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

><br>"We'll have to get back to you."

><br>Joe nodded to the couple. As funny as the situation was there was a serious point to be looked at. If Angel got a glimmer of happiness then Angelus would dominate again. And in the current state of affairs, the vampire would go straight to the Mayor. That had to be talked about but that was to be between the Slayer and the vampire. There was still something else to be taken care of.

><br>"What about this one?"

><br>Willow bent over the vampire and saw that it was coming about. Her movements were jerky, almost spasmodic. The witch could see her eyelids flutter rapidly as if the vampire was going through a nightmare. With unbelievable speed the creature shot up to a sitting position and began to scream. Willow jumped back and then went forward herself, engulfing the vampire in a crushing hug. The vampire started to cry and hugged her living double.

><br>Joe stood over the pair. He could see that this vampire had changed by the fear that seemed to come from every movement. But the wasn't what was wrong with this moment. Something was bothering him and it wasn't about this newly souled creature. He turned and looked as Angel ushered Buffy to the door. The sense that he had missed something was there again. The rest of the gang looked at them as the couple went to leave and it hit Joe.

><br>The orb had flared.

><br>He whirled and aimed the crossbow. Before anyone of the Scooby Gang could react he shot at Angel as he and Buffy were going out the door.

><br>The bolt hit the door cutting Angel's shoulder as it passed by.



The vampire whirled around, grabbing Buffy by the neck in the process and holding her up in front of him. She started to struggle and Angelus knew that wouldn't be able to control her for much longer. He could see the Pale Man reach for another bolt and he knew that his time was nearly up. Reaching back for the bolt that was still shaking from being fired he broke it off and stabbed Buffy hard in the back with the stub. She gasped with the pain and her breathing became ragged with each further gasp.

><br>Xander jumped forward to grab the vampire before he could hurt Buffy any further. A cold pair of hands stopped him, gripping him in a strength that was not human. He looked around to see Ash holding him hard and Joe aiming the reloaded crossbow at Angelus again.

><br>"Be a nice leech and drop the girl."

><br>Angelus laughed. It was a sound that couldn't be described as happy. More like happy to inflict pain without restraint.

><br>"Go ahead. Shoot. From what I can see that toy of yours has had a little accident. You couldn't hit shit at the moment."

><br>Joe kept aiming at the vampire. But he knew that it was right. The first shot should have taken the vampire straight in the heart.

><br> "I don't really care if I hit the girl or not. I only know that if I don't try she's dead. Whatever the outcome I get to kill you."

> <br> Angelus hissed and transformed his face to the demon inside. He gave everyone a happy grin and bit Buffy lightly on the neck, just enough to draw blood. It got the effect he wanted. Giles and Wesley shot forward in an attempt to pull the Slayer from his grasp. And got right in Joe's line of fire. Angelus hoisted up his burden and threw her into the arms of the two Watchers, then escaped through the open door behind. Joe pushed his way past the crowd gathered around the badly wounded girl.

><br> Joe started to curse. The vampire was no where to be seen, which wasn't surprising. Angelus knew that he'd be fucked if Joe caught him. And now the Pale Man had other worries.

><br> Josephus looked down at the girl. Giles was ripping off his shirt in an effort to stem the bleeding but it looked too bad a wound to be stopped as easily as that. He pushed the Watcher aside and checked Buffy's pulse.

><br> "Grab her and get her over to the couch. If she lives for the next minute we're fine."

><br> Once he saw that the Slayer was on her way he ran to the crystal locker and grabbed a black velvet bag. Taking out a flat black crystal embedded in rough steel he ran over to the injured girl and exposed the wound. And then he turned Pale Man. The Gang stepped back as the colour leached from his skin and his hair and eyes went a lifeless black. What happened next really hit the others hard. He didn't show any emotion as he pushed the crystal into the wound and placed his hard flat against it. Stripping off his T-shirt with his free hand he started to incant in a harsh barking language.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Buffy arched her back as a massive stabbing pain hit her. It ebbed to a dull roar and then nothing. Feeling came back into her limbs and she rolled over onto her back until she felt the sharp edges of something bite into her. Sitting up quickly she looked down to see Joe, or something that looked like Joe, on the ground with a pool of blood under him. And the Scooby Gang standing around in shock.

><br> "What happened?"

><br> She reached to the small of her back and her hand came away soaked in blood. She looked down and twisted her head but could only see the edge of a bruise."  
><br> "WHAT HAPPENED?"  
><br> "Angel stabbed you and then ran. Joe touched you with this crystal and the wound went from you to him. And then he collapsed."

><br> Buffy let her top fall down over where her wound had been. She lifted the Pale Man's head off the ground and wiped his forehead of the sweat that was there. His eyes sprang open and she could see the pain in them.

><br> "Why did you do it?"

><br> "Something to pass the time."

><br> Joe laughed and then coughed painfully. His legs bent in under him in pain and then he flipped himself up off the floor. He laughed at the Scooby Gang's shock at his apparently instantaneous recovery. He looked down at the bloody wound.

><br> "If a Pale Man was as easily hurt as that..."

><br> He pointed to the closing wound.

><br> "...then there wouldn't be as many Pale Men around."

><br> Buffy touched her side again in wonder and held up her hand, covered in her own blood. She stared angrily at Joe as he rubbed the blood and crud away from his wound.

><br> "How did you do that?"

><br> Joe looked up at the Slayer in annoyance. He needed to get this done with so he could hunt Angelus down before the demon could do anything reversible like go to the Mayor and tell all.

><br> "Do you know anything about crystal resonance or crystal imaging?"

><br> Buffy shook her head but Joe saw both of the Watchers and Willow nod.

><br> "Fine you tell her. And get her home. Now. She may be healed but she lost a lot of blood. Now out the lot of you."

><br> Buffy looked at Willow and her 'twin' who hadn't moved from their spot on the ground.

><br> "What will we do with her?"

><br> Willow popped up and then stopped dead. Her first reaction was to bring this 'sister' home but the thought of turning up on her doorstep, in front of her mother, with this twin, might be a bit too much. Buffy wouldn't be able to take her because she was trying to keep her mother away from the whole Slayage deal at the moment. She couldn't even think about a copy of herself staying with Zander, especially if she dressed like that. Joe saw the wheels turning and gave his answer before the girl could ask.

><br> "Yes, she can stay here. No, I promise not to kill her. Is that okay or do you want it in blood?"

><br> Willow nodded a thank you to Joe and bent down to her twin. She whispered in the vampire's ear and gave her another small hug. Then, as a group, the gang filed out the door. Joe caught Wesley and shoved him against the door. Buffy heard the commotion and came back in.

><br> "What's wrong now?"

><br> Joe pulled a book from inside Wesley's jacket. Then he kneed the Watcher hard in the groin.

><br> "I'll help you're boyfriend if I can. But the payback is this. Is snot-rag here tells the Watchers about me, I can kill him. If he tries to steal a book of mine again I can kill him. If he does anything I don't like I get to..."

><br> "...kill him. I can live with that."

><br> Wesley looked at his Slayer in abject terror. She was supposed

to protect the weak and helpless from the forces of evil. And that book was too important to the Watchers. Joe pushed him out, said goodbye to the Slayer and closed the door.

><br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

> Wesley held the Slayers arm as Giles held the passenger door open on his ancient Citroen. There wasn't enough room for all of the Gang in Giles' car so Joe had willingly volunteered his Jeep to Wesley just so he could get rid of them.<br>The rest of the gang piled into the Jeep and watched Buffy and Giles disappear.

><br> "So. You know how to drive this, Wes old man."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>"What happened with Angel?"

><br>"I'd say that the possibility of getting a permanent soul made him a bit too happy. I'd say that he's been looking for a spell like mine for ages and the thought of getting one this easily pushed him over the edge."

><br>The librarian stopped at that.

><br>"So he's out there again. Just like before. Only this time he wouldn't make the same mistakes. He'll just come for me and you and..."

><br>"It's no use thinking about it, Buffy. Joe is right in this one case. Nothing we have run into so far has been as bad as this. The world ending is one thing but the prospect of an Elder demon lose on a powerless world is another. And we have to concentrate on this."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>"Thank fuck they're gone."

><br>The Pale Man closed the door and looked at the mess inside the door. Alter-Willow's protective blanket with its collection of car debris was in one corner while the woman herself was in the other. And that caused another problem. If he treated the vampire with anything other than kid gloves it would show and he'd get an earful from the two girls in the morning, or whenever they turned up to collect her. He groaned. And if it couldn't get worse he had to deal with the possibility of Angelus making a return call tonight.

><br>"Tomorrow's a school day."

><br>"I wouldn't know."

><br>Joe looked up at the vampire. She was standing with Willow's cardigan on her. The girl had given it to her once she had started to talk. They had both seen the effect of her clothes on Zander.

><br>"Is there anything I can wear?"

><br>Joe grimaced. He grabbed the girl by the elbow and towed her over to the stairs.

><br>"Go up there. There's t-shirts and other gear in the wardrobe."

><br>The vampire went up the stairs slowly and into the room. Joe shook his head at the stupidity of having this person here. It was something to think about another time. He sat on the couch and flicked on the TV for his nightly dose of sci-fi.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The Mayor of Sunnydale, Richard T. Wilkins the Third was not too happy. Not that you would be able to see it from looking at him. Faith had been due back over an hour ago with the books and yet there was not a sign, not even a phone call to see if his little girl was all right. He stood looking through the venetian blinds in his office hoping for the sight of her coming around the corner, bouncing with youth and happiness.

><br>Instead he saw his adopted daughter come around the corner limping. What was worse was she was empty-handed. A chuckle came from behind him. He didn't even bother turning around.  
><br>"What is there to laugh about?"  
><br>"You're private little Slayer is fucking up..."  
><br>"Mind the language!"  
><br>"...by the numbers. Sorry. But face facts, the way she is she's of no use."  
><br>Wilkins finally turned to look at his new 'night staff manager'.

><br>"That girl has zero opportunities since she came into this cruel world. And now, in her hour of need, when she's really in pain, you're telling me to abandon her."  
><br>"If the Pale Man came for you, how long would you last with her in your corner."  
><br>The Mayor didn't respond, he just went back to looking at Faith again.  
><br>"It's a pity. All that potential is going to go to waste."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*  
><br>He had all of two minutes of peace and quiet when the silence got too much. He had heard only a few seconds of moving around in the bedroom upstairs and then nothing. Making a fair amount of noise going up the stairs, he knocked on the door. He knocked and waited. And waited.  
><br>\* Enough of this shite. \*  
><br>The door opened back to its fullest and Joe looked in. The vampire was sitting on the bed, wearing one of his newer T-shirts. And nothing else. But that wasn't what affected him. The vampire...

><br> \* I have to stop thinking of her like that. The demon is no longer in control. \*  
><br>The girl was looking down on the catsuit that she had been wearing. Her hands were stained with black with old bloodstains that covered the costume. He had to do something or she would go mad. He stepped forward and took the other end of the garment and pulled. It slipped out of her grasp and she looked up just in time to see him bundle it up and throw it into his wastebasket. She morphed into her game-face in anger.  
><br> "What the hell did you do that for?"  
><br> "You were turned into a vampire and every vice and petty evil in you became the focus of your 'life'. I'd say the the blood of nearly every kill you've made is on the thing and you want to keep it?"  
><br> Her face changed back and she fell back onto the bed with a sob that dissolved into a torrent of bloody tears. Joe didn't move from where he was.  
><br> "It doesn't matter if you chose freely to become a vampire or not. You didn't know what the consequences would be. What matters now is that you atone for every one of the lives you took. And I will make sure of that."  
><br> He left her.  
><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe awoke of few hours later. He was sprawled across the couch, a beer can and the remnants of another take-away scattered across the table beside him. Stretching, Joe looked at the clock display on the video and muttered 'crap' at what he saw. Half past two in the morning was not the sort of time to be fully awake. He looked across to the other sofa couch and saw that his houseguest had decided to rejoin the ranks of the 'living'. She was going through some of the

books in his library, the newer ones. He twisted his head to catch sight of the title and his movement startled her.

><br> "Morning."

><br> The grin that he got at the joke was the mirror image of the one he had got from this realties Willow. That thought up a disturbing point.

><br> "We have a slight problem. You can't go out looking the way you are. If you run into anyone from the highschool they'll recognise you and we'll have great fun trying to pawn off two Willows."

><br> Alter-Willow nodded.

><br> "I was thinking about that. When I came around I looked up and saw Cordelia straight in front of me, alive and well. But I can remember killing her. I know that if I walk down the street tomorrow night I'll see people that I killed or saw killed or..."

><br> Joe touched her hand to stop the depressing turn to her speech.

><br> "So what have you thought of for a name? Do you have a middle..?"

><br> Willow started to giggle. If he thought that her first name was hippie-like he would probably stroke out with laughter if he heard it.

><br> "I take it that my suggestion wasn't exactly the smart thing to say."

><br> Willow kept giggling away. Joe was marvelled by the change. The vampire had gone from a beaten, depressed state to the persona of her 'twin'. It was some change. He could see that in the few minutes that he had been away she had done the best she could to clean herself up. All he had in the way of shampoo and toiletries was a bar of Coal Tar Soap and a bargain litre of extra strong mouthwash with free aftershave.

><br> Willow caught the stare and stopped laughing.

><br> "What's wrong?"

><br> Joe blushed slightly at being caught and tried to hide it.

><br> "I have an idea for a name. How about 'Ash'? It's still in the tree theme and everything."

><br> Willow gave a little smile and a nod.

><br> "It'll do. Thank you."

><br> "No problem, Ash."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Willow, the live one, ran down to the Pale Man's house as fast as she could. The four shopping bags that she carried were pulling her off balance and threatening to spill onto the ground every time she tried to steady herself. The cargo had been acquired when Josephus had rung her house just before school with a request. Could she go do some shopping for her 'new friend'? It took all of half a second to volunteer and Joe was parked outside her house with his credit card in one hand and his mobile phone in the other. He had gone with her to the first three shops and after seeing what she was buying he returned to the car and an Isaac Asimov novel.

><br> If she was struggling, Joe was having trouble walking. He couldn't decide which was bigger. The mass of bills or the seven shopping bags he had to carry. Before he could decide 'Ash' had opened the door carefully and let them into the house. Willow carefully put her load on the floor and gave her double a hug. Joe walked two steps in and dropped his lot. Giving the two girls a look he decided a retreat was in order.

><br> "I'll leave you two girls alone. I have to go sell off a couple of priceless antiques to cover the cost of the mobile phone bill. I don't know what I'm going to do with the credit card bill. Maybe skip

the country."

><br> Willow and Ash started to laugh and Joe left with what little dignity he had in tatters.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Faith grimaced in pain as she jarred her back again. The exertion of walking the two miles had taken its toll on the injury and the bench she was resting on wasn't helping. Popping out the drugs the doctor had given her she took another two. As she dry swallowed the pills, she thought of the amount of pain she was going to cause the guy who had done this to her.

><br> \* The Pale Man. Sounds really scary. \*

> <br> She snorted. If the guy was as scary as Rayne had made out, she would have heard about it from one of those lame ass Watchers. Grimacing again, she sat up and watched the sun dip below the horizon. A scrape of metal on concrete behind her heralded the arrival of the Mayor's 'night staff'.

><br>She had argued with the Mayor when he had told her that he was giving the Doherty job to the vampires but common sense had prevailed. She was too weak to take care of the three Dohertys. The demons may not be smart but they had a new leader in the form of a former university student who went by the name of Sunday. The Mayor seemed to think that this demon was more than able to do the job.

><br>And all Faith had to do was point the way and then go home. So much for being a Slayer.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> James Doherty sat back in his chair and let out a contented sigh. The bank had had a pretty bad day of it. Two loud and disgusting customers had been refused loans and hadn't been satisfied. They had made this known to half of Sunnydale, screaming out their lungs about the harassment that they were receiving from him and everyone else. It had taken ten minutes and the threat of arrest to shut them up and get rid of them. Even then James knew that the whole story with all the Chinese whispers attached would be going around middle class Sunnydale by the end of the day.

><br> "Milla. What do we do tonight?"

><br> Emer came from the front hall and smirked at her father.

><br> "Nothing, if you shout at her like that. But if you get up and go to the kitchen and ask nicely, you'll find out that there's a film on in the cinema in town that she might like to see. Go get ready and we'll go."

> <br> The man of the house groaned. Of all the things to have on a day like this. He walked to the kitchen door to talk to his wife before she could poison his sandwiches for tomorrow's lunch. He halted when he heard a car pull up the driveway.

><br> He knew Sunnydale. No one went out after dark in a secluded neighbourhood like this unless it was absolutely necessary. Walking quietly to the door, he peeked out the side window into the eyes of a well-dressed young girl. Smiling he opened the door just as his wife and daughter were leaving the kitchen to go upstairs. He turned his attention back to the young girl.

><br> "Can I help you miss?"

><br> The girl startled him with a wide smile.

><br> "Yes sir. Are you the owner of this house?"

><br> Puzzled by the question, James Doherty told the truth.

><br> "Yes."

><br> The girl's hand moved in a blur and a gun was pointed at his chest. Her face changed, morphing into a grotesque parody of a human's, and then she pulled the trigger.

><br> Emer was halfway up the stairs when she heard her father speak for the last time. When she saw the vampire's true face appear she tried to shout a warning but only a scream came out as her father died. The vampire switched her aim and shot at her stepping forward as the barrier of protection left as his soul fled his body. The shots never connected as her mother shoved her hard from behind almost knocking off her feet. She rounded the small bend in the stairs and saw the vampire aim again, this time at her mother.

><br> The shots hit home and her mothers last act was to shove her into the protection of her parents' bedroom. A phone and her Dad's gun were inside. But it didn't matter.

> <br> She didn't stand a chance.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The transformation was amazing. A haircut, a pair of glasses and a big budget had turned the vampire Willow into something else. When the Scooby Gang had arrived with both Watchers in tow, she had just been putting the finishing touches on her makeup. It hadn't taken much for her to make a show of it, slowly walking down the stairs from what was now her bedroom. The T-shirt was gone, replaced by designer jeans, boots and blouse.

><br>\*She could have gone for any number of ensembles \* Joe grumbled to himself, \*she had spent enough. \*

><br>Xander was the most awe stricken. In every way the girl coming down the steps was Willow but a Willow with the confidence and fashion sense of Cordelia. It brought to mind the plot of most of his favourite B-movie sci-fi films. He could feel his jaw hanging open and couldn't do anything about it. Cordelia solved it for him, snapping it shut with a hard shove to his jaw.

><br>Joe grinned at this. It was something that could distract him from the Ascension for the moment. He decided to go the whole hog and act out the part of MC for the girl.

><br>"Ladies and Gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to introduce, Ash..."

><br>And then his mobile phone rang.

><br>With a grin he grabbed the phone and answered it. The grin disappeared very quickly. Without a word to anyone he grabbed his coat and a crossbow and ran out the door. Before he was at the jeep both Buffy and Giles were behind him. He stopped them both with a glance.

><br>"Buffy, you have to stay behind to keep watch. The Mayor has made some kind of move and I need to make sure another isn't made against this place. Pack up the books, crystals and get them to somewhere safe. Get Willow and Ash to wipe the computers."

><br>The Slayer and the former Watcher shared a quick look and Buffy stepped back into the Palace. Giles opened the jeep door and swung himself in. Without any further words the two men were gone.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe gritted his teeth as the traffic lights ahead turned red. He couldn't afford the delay but he couldn't chance getting caught by the cops for speeding or running the light. Not at this time. He counted off his heartbeats to pass the time and floored the accelerator when the light hit green. He gave his passenger a quick glance to see if anything was wrong and caught the tension as the jeep continued to accelerate. Smiling slightly he slowed to just above the speed limit and cruised the last few miles to the Doherty's house.

><br> He could see that he was too late when the strobes of ambulance and police cars flashed against the walls of the neighbours' houses.

Slowing even more as he approached the police barricade he jumped out and walked over to the crowd control officer.

><br> "Sorry to bother you officer. Could you tell me what happened here? I'm a friend of the Doherty family."

><br> The officer reached out and snagged Joe by the arm. He turned slightly and beckoned one of the detectives over. What he learnt was not good.

><br> Giles could see the shock hit Joe as the detective talked to the Pale Man. He rolled down the window and caught the scents on the air. Even from this far he could get the scent of blood in the air. To smell that this far from the scene only meant that the deaths had been brutal. Stepping out of the car he walked over to Joe and went to comfort him. But it wasn't really necessary. He could see the grief in the Pale Man's eyes but he could also see an overwhelming rage. A rage that could only be directed at one person. The one who had done this deed.

><br> Fending off the questions of the officers, Joe gave them the address of the Palace and promised to come into the station to give a statement. Giles jumped into the driver's seat but Joe took the wheel. He started the motor, driving off as quickly as he could without raising any suspicions.

> <br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe drove back towards the Palace in a daze. The one sided conversation with the detective hadn't been pleasant. In his lifetime Joe had seen a lot worse and done most of it to some people. But to have three Family members killed and then their bodies brutalised... The detectives had said that it had looked like a 'gang hit' and that animals had been set on the bodies only meant that vampires had fed on the bodies. But that didn't matter now. What mattered was getting the sick fucks that did this and cut them into small pieces. What mattered was asking them, under the cruellest torture he could devise, who had told them to do this. And then he would bring down a whole fucking world of hurt on the...

><br> Joe calmed himself and slowed the car to within the speed limit. Breathing deeply he released some of the tension that had built up in such a short time. And then he hit paydirt.

><br> If he had have been going faster and had still been ranting on he would have missed her.

><br> Faith.

><br> The Slayer was walking slowly along the sidewalk down towards the centre of Sunnydale. Joe could see that she was limping slightly from the damage he had caused her only the day before. He glanced at the Watcher beside him.

><br> "Get down Giles."

><br> The librarian ducked his head down.

><br> \*Time to add to her hospital bills. \*

><br> He slowed the car to a crawl and pulled over behind the girl. He flashed his lights at her and moved the car forward. She took the hint and stopped, then turned to approach the passenger side. Joe leaned across and opened the door for her and just as she reached for it he hit the accelerator and the jeep shot forward. The door caught her a glancing blow but it was enough to knock her from her feet. As she hit the rough concrete of the sidewalk the pain from her back hit her like a train and her vision went grey. She never even saw the Pale Man walk up beside her and kick her in the head until she lost consciousness.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>It was almost dÃ©jÃ vu. Josephus walked in the door with a large bundle in his arms, wrapped in the old blanket that had held 'Ash' not too many hours ago. This time he was a lot less careful



when he threw the bundle to the ground. A flap of the blanket exposed the battered and bloody face of Faith. Everything stopped. Buffy and the gang were in the middle of packing Joe's stuff into whatever could hold it safely when he had arrived in. To say that they were shocked would be nothing short of an understatement.

><br> "Get out."

><br> Joe turned into the Pale Man, totally this time. Waves of almost palpable hate came off him and they wisely backed off. All except Buffy.

><br> "What are you going to do?"

><br> "What am I going to do? Little miss attitude and me are going to have a chat, nothing formal. Just you're average Pulp Fiction pliers and blowtorch chat. And she is going to tell me whatever I want to know."

><br> Faith was looking around in a daze that didn't change as the Pale Man told the gang of what would be her fate. It wasn't too hard to see that the Rogue Slayer was badly injured, perhaps even dying. They doubted that this would stop Josephus.

><br> "You can't do this."

><br> Joe swung around and glared at Buffy. She had steeped forward and had her hands clenched down by her side. As much as she didn't like the fact that Faith had betrayed them all to the Mayor she hated the prospect of torture more. It brought back memories of Angelus. And that was too much.

><br> "Let me tell you this. There is an entire family dead not too far from here. They were shot and killed, and before the bodies were cold the vampires fed on them and then ripped them apart. And it was my responsibility to take care of them. "

><br> Joe went nose to nose with Buffy.

><br> "I know that this little bitch is the Mayor's prize possession and I know that she was coming from the direction of the house. SO BACK THE FUCK OFF while she and I chat."

><br> Buffy stumbled back at the roar from Joe. In all the time that she had been the Slayer no one had ever talked to her like that. She grabbed her coat and stalked over to the door.

><br> "I won't say that you don't have the right to get revenge. I won't say that you should. But I can't ever work with you or help you if you do this. I know that she isn't the best of people but she hasn't ever really had a chance."

><br> "It wasn't her."

><br> Everyone stared at Giles. He looked directly at Joe, avoiding the gazes of everyone else including Buffy.

><br> "I checked with the hospital. Faith had a massive injury that would have crippled a normal person. Even with her Slayer abilities she would be hard pressed to cover the distance between the Doherty's house and where we... picked her up. You saw how easily she went down and you only hit her a glancing blow."

><br> Joe clenched his jaw tightly and let out a long hiss. The entire gang could see he wanted to let off steam and the nearest thing he could vent it on was lying down and tied up on the floor. He breathed in and closed his eyes.

><br> "Right."

><br> Reaching down, Joe grabbed Faith by the hair and lifted her off the ground. Keeping her feet a good foot off the ground he marched over to the couch and threw her down. Sitting down beside her he grabbed her head again and peeled back one of her eyelids. The eye was heavily bloodshot and moving wildly about. Both Angel and Ash came over to stand beside him.

><br> "She's dying."

><br> Giles moved from his seat at the reading table with Wesley.

Putting down his book carefully he came around the couch and pushed Joe out of the way to check the Slayer for himself.

><br> "We need to get her to a hospital."

><br> "Not a chance. If we move her from here the Mayor will know. And he probably has a camera on the front of this place to monitor me. So unless you want the cops on top of all of us, we do it my way."

><br> Joe went to the boxes that the Scooby Gang had piled his stuff into. He rummaged around until he came to a heavy velvet bag, tied with a heavy wire and a Yale combination lock. He dialled the combination and took out a blue and white crystal before placing the bag back into the box. As he lowered the crystal onto the injured Slayer's chest it's colours started to flash and pulse. As it finally touched her skin, Faith gave a moan that built into a shriek before she passed out.

><br> "All we do now is wait."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Faith was in pain.

><br> Her mind flitted between a thousand scenes without coherence.

><br>She kicked in the door of the demon that had the Books of Ascension and saw him scurry out the window.

><br>She saw the Mayor give her the knife that she loved. She felt the pleasure of touching it again.

><br>They flashed past faster and faster causing nausea that built and built. And behind the images was a light that grew brighter with every second and burned her as it got closer. When the light eclipsed the images she could see its teardrop shape and the light within it reaching out for her. All she could do was struggle at the things that bound her to the place she was in as the shape touched her and the light shot out from within to engulf her in agony.

><br>The light ripped her from the images and showed her herself. She saw the stalking of a vampire and the terror it felt. She felt the pain as she toyed with the creature, as she slowly broke bone after bone before finally killing it. She wailed as she could see that this would be one of a thousand memories that held pain, a thousand times worse than each memory before.

><br>She screamed.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Willow sat down in the chair as another moan escaped Faith's lips. She and the Slayer had never got along, a distrust existing between them that neither could really fathom. But this was a little too much for the witch to take. She gripped Oz's arm and put her head onto his shoulder as he squatted down beside her. Another moan came from the Slayer and Willow let her eyes wander around the room in an effort to distract herself. And she looked straight into her own eyes. She sat up and almost knocked Oz over until she remembered the presence of Ash. The vampire looked at her and stepped forward. Squatting down beside Oz, she whispered to them both.

><br>Willow could see her own pain mirrored in her twin's eyes.

Reaching out she took her lifeless sister's hand and listened to what she had to say.

><br> "The Slayer... Faith is not dying. Joe explained some of this to me. The crystal is healing her but it has only a finite amount of its own energy to draw on. The crystal calls up memories of the injured person and uses them to create empathic energy that it can then use to heal. The greater the emotional reaction the greater the energy and the faster it heals. In most cases it fails because it needs massive amounts of emotion to work, and that is not present in the average human. Not even in a teenager with their emotional and

hormonal imbalance."

><br>A look of hatred suddenly came over the vampire's face.

><br>"And from what I have read and can guess she has caused enough pain."

><br>She threw a small stack of papers onto the ground at Willow's feet. She glanced down at the pile and saw the cover and it's title. 'Slayer 2?' She reached down to take it when another moan escaped Faith's lips and she left it lie there.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> A half-hour had passed. Buffy had taken a seat on the couch with Faith and held her hand for most of it. She had felt the strength return to the other Slayer's body as every second passed and seen the wounds and blood disappear. The moans didn't stop coming though. As Faith's strength increased so did her reaction to whatever was tormenting her. And it didn't look like it was stopping.

><br> And then it did.

><br> The crystal's colours slowed and stopped their wild shifting. Without a word, Joe took the crystal from the Slayer's chest and returned it to the velvet bag. And he came back to the couch and just stood there.

><br> Faith's eyes opened and she looked around in a daze that took in all of the Scooby gang and their ally. The gaze froze when it hit the Pale Man and took on all the components of a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. Buffy could see Faith strain at the chains binding her, and fail. Joe reached down and grabbed the Slayers face.

><br> "Now that I have your complete attention, I'd like to say something. You know who killed the Doherty family. I know who ordered them killed, what I really want to know is who actually did the deed. Everything else is secondary at the moment."

><br> Faith squirmed under Joe's grip but wasn't able to break it. She looked up at him and said nothing, just stared at him defiantly. He smiled.

><br> "Can you remember the pain that you just experienced. I can put you through that again. And again. I don't really want to..."

><br> The Slayer snorted at this.

><br> "No really. I don't need anything from you but the name of the vampire that did the deed. And once you tell me, I don't need you anymore. But then you'll have to make a choice. Are you against me or for me? Because if you're against me I'll give you less of a chance than you had in the alley. I'll just kill you."

><br> Faith started to squirm again. But not to get free. With a violent twist of her head she bit down into the fleshy side of Joe's hand and drew blood. With his other hand he slapped Faith hard and she released him, falling off the couch in the process. He held the hand over her head and turned fully Pale Man.

><br> Faith looked on as Joe's skin turned fully white. His hair went jet black and settled back onto his head as if gelled in place. His eyes lost their bright green colour and became an absolute black. But the worse transformation was the total lack of emotion on the Man's face. Nothing, no anger or pain at the wounding.

><br> Faith had nothing but fear in her eyes as she looked at this. OF all the creatures that she had faced in her time as a Slayer she had never fought one that had never displayed emotion. And that truly scared her. She knew from her own emotions that before you kill you savour the moment and delay to let it last as long as possible. This creature wouldn't even bother; it would just kill her and move on.

><br> She looked at the wound and knew that it should evoke some

emotion or feeling. The image blurred as it finally hit her. She didn't stand a chance against this person. And then she saw the wound close slowly, its edges knitting together and the bloodflow stopping altogether. A minute passed and nothing remained but a bruise and then not even that.

><br> Faith bent her legs and pushed back moving snakelike across the ground and away from the Pale Man. It was as if nothing else mattered to her but getting away from this man. The presence of the Watchers, Xander, Willow, even Buffy, didn't matter. Her squirming came to a stop when she felt a hand clamp down on her ankle and pull her back to the spot beside the couch. She started to scream as the hand moved up her body and began to pull her chains off as if they were nothing but paper.

><br> Faith couldn't help but cower as Joe knelt down beside her and placed his hands in his lap. He cocked his head at her and the colour returned to his face. But, most importantly for the Slayer so did the emotion. He smiled at her.

><br> "From here on in, if you want it Faith, no-one will ever ask you to do anything again. We won't ask you or tell you to do anything. All I'm asking, just now and never again, is that you listen for a bit and trust me."

><br> She jerked her head in a quick nod.

><br> "You've been put in positions where you have never had a choice about the direction of you're life. Some of the results of this have been less than good. And the only choices you could make were worse. But I'm giving you a chance here and now to make a choice. If you work with me, not for me, I will try everything, do everything I can to help you. What do you say?"

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br> Buffy looked down at the Slayer and at the Pale Man. At the moment the only emotion that she could feel was hate. It was the Mayor and Faith that had brought her to this position. She had given Faith every chance and got stabbed in the back. She had managed to get Angel back and lost him again to Angelus. And one of the two who had betrayed her was getting away scot-free.

><br> "You can't do this."

><br> Joe stood and held out his hand to help Faith up. She reached out to take it and Joe could only grin as she stood beside him.

><br> "I don't care what you think, Buffy. As of this moment, Faith has my total support. And all she has to do is take my support. And nothing else. Faith, I need to talk to Buffy for a few minutes. Do you want to sit down?"

><br> Faith nodded and sat down, watching Joe the whole time.

><br> "I am giving Faith a chance. I am going to give her the chance to become a Slayer and a human being. I am going to give her the chance to redeem her soul and not have to sell it in the process. And the last thing she needs at the moment is someone screaming at her for something she didn't do."

><br> He turned back to Faith and knelt eye to eye with her.

><br> "You probably feel tired. If you want Ash will show you the bedroom and you can sleep. If you need anything up there she can show you."

><br> He waited until Ash and the Slayer were up the stairs and in his bedroom.

><br> "People. I need a bit of assistance. Can you put everything back in the lockers? I have an idea that the cops are going to be paying a visit in a few minutes on the advice of the Mayor. You'll need to get out of here quick, so please move as fast as you can."

><br> Xander ran to the door and held it open just enough to see out and down to the street. There was a chance that the cops would come the other way from the other end but this side would be the easiest. Willow, Giles and Joe started to gather up the boxes of books and crystals that had been packed under Ash's supervision. After a few seconds Wesley and Buffy joined in, but both seemed to be thinking of other things.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br> She felt that she was being hit on all sides by her emotions. In the space of three days her world had gone from the natural disaster it usually was to a complete shambles. She had lost Angel again and all the pain that had come the first time was back. Her newest friend and a fellow Slayer had shown that she was a turncoat and worked for the greatest enemy they had ever faced. And she couldn't call her out on it because the only other super-natural ally she had was backing the traitor up.

> <br> But no matter what had happened everything that she was thinking about had to be put on the back burner until the Ascension was dealt with.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br> Wesley looked down at the box of books he was carrying.

><br> \* There is a wealth of information on the Watchers in my hands and they can never see it. Not unless something is worked out with the Pale Man. And I do not have the authority. The Council must know.  
\*

><br> He stacked the box on the table and began to put them back on the shelf.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Xander looked back into the room every few seconds, keeping an eye on the Gang and their ally. It was really weird. This guy is like Angel: a wolf in sheep's clothing. He couldn't help but not feel comfortable around the Pale Man. Knowing so much about who and what he was didn't help.

><br>\* Miss Calendar had known all about Angel and see where it got her. \*

><br> A crunch of tires on gravel and the sight of a car turning into the alley broke his train of thought. He started to wave his hand and managed to only get the dweeb's attention. Wesley, seeing Xander wave frantically started to gibber at the thought of getting arrested. Giles grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him to the back, away from the front door and the sight of anyone who might come in. Buffy and Willow quickly followed with Xander running behind.

><br> Joe waited until the gang was safely out of sight behind the staircase. If anyone was smart it would be the first place to look but Joe had a plan to safely keep the cops right by the door.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The knock on the door was loud enough to wake the dead. The door was open but Joe was sure that they had seen the light inside and Xander move away from the door at the last minute. After counting to ten, Joe stepped forward and opened the door fully.

><br>"Evening officers. Or is it Detectives."

><br>The cops took a step back at the reversal of roles. Normally they would be the ones who would act and then wait to see the reaction. The two looked at each other and took ID wallets out of their pockets. They both held them up while the younger looking one made the introduction.

><br>"I'm Detective Brenner and this is Detective Sergeant Coolidge. Are you Archer Dale?"

><br>"At the moment."

><br>The answer caught the two off guard again.

><br>"We understand that you were at the Doherty house tonight and were speaking with one of our other officers. You said that you were friends of the family. Can we ask you some questions about your relationship with the Dohertys?"

><br>Joe nodded and stepped back, giving them room to enter. They took the invitation and came in slowly, giving what they could see a good lookover. Before they could go far from the door, Joe stopped them.

><br>"If you want to go any further you'll need a warrant. And you don't really want to do that."

><br>The older of the two cops, Coolidge, spoke up.

><br>"And why is that, Mr. Dale? And before you answer that could you do me a favour and tell me why we couldn't find any reference to you in Sunnydale?"

><br>Joe smiled.

><br>"Detective Coolidge, do you have a mobile phone?"

><br>Coolidge and Brenner shared a quick look.

><br>"Yes, I do."

><br>"Take it out."

><br>The cops shared another quick look and Brenner then dropped his eyes to his shoes. While his partner took out his mobile phone Brenner started a deceptive side to side movement that produced a fair distance between the two.

><br>"Since you have the phone out, dial Washington D.C. directory assistance."

><br>The two detectives caught the implications of the request. There were a lot of groups with little letters in that area of the country. And if any of these groups took a close look at Sunnydale...

><br>"Ask for the Hoover Building. I believe you know the organisation."

><br>Coolidge had come to the point of no return. If he called the bluff at this point a lot of people might get hurt. But his instructions from the Chief, and the Chiefs orders from the Mayor, were very explicit: find a way to arrest Dale. He dialled the number and got the Operator.

><br>"Thank you operator."

><br>He dialled the area code and felt his partner brush up against his sleeve. The younger man's anxiety was showing and Coolidge could see Dale smiling widely. The smile got wider when the phone started to ring.

><br>"When the feebies answer, ask for the Director. Say that Archer Dale is calling."

><br>Coolidge stammered out the few words that Dale had just said and in seconds got the gruff voice of a man that he had heard only on the TV before. He snapped the phone shut.

><br>Joe started to speak.

><br>"You have two options. The first is this: you can arrest me like I think your bosses have told you to and tomorrow a hundred Federal agents will descend on this town. And from what I've seen so far most of the Sunnydale Police Department will be looking at Kansas from the inside of Leavenworth not too long after. Or you can leave, call in sick, get your families and disappear for the next month. I really recommend the disappearing strategy."

><br>Gently putting his hands on the two cops' shoulders he guided them out. They were too shocked to stop him. He shut the door behind them and was glad to hear, after a couple of seconds, the sounds of a

car tearing out of the alley as fast as it could go.

><br>The cops were gone and that was good. What wasn't good was the Mayor would know that he had spooked two of his best detectives. Wilkins would have to try something else now. Joe had to give the gang the bad news.

><br>"Start packing again. I need every book and crystal moved. Now."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The packing was the easiest. This time everyone helped while Ash and Willow checked out if the police had started files on Joe or the Doherty family. Once the packing was done the Gang left to go home and to bed. But not before they had agreed to come back before classes to help him move.

><br>The hard part was identifying the surveillance that the Mayor had put on him, and the team that the cops had. Even though he had been successful in scaring off the two detectives, Joe was sure that the rest wouldn't be so easy.

><br>But the cops were easy to find. A shop across the road had an unmarked car parked behind it and a new set of net curtains in the window above the front. The Mayor's team was harder until Xander realised that the Mayor could just be using a camera. It took ten minutes and a pair of binoculars to find the three cameras that covered both entrances to the alley and the door to the Palace. Moving out slowly and as obviously as possible, Xander crossed the street with Buffy in tow. A few minutes later they were back, Buffy having destroyed the cameras with stones thrown by Slayer accuracy and Xander on the lookout for any chance witnesses.

><br>The second that the two got back to the Palace, Joe had the Jeep backed up to the door and the loading began. It was obvious that the cops could see them from the street, so any attempt to hide what they were doing was dismissed. They just moved faster.

><br>Once the gear was in, Joe shut the doors to the Palace and drove off with his unofficial police escort in tow. Two and half-hours later they orbited the centre of town, parking and pulling out before Joe had the sequence of surveillance memorised. The second that he saw the next changeover he floored the accelerator and disappeared into an alley. By the time the cops got into gear he was long gone. And in a different car.

><br>Xander was waiting for him at the new centre of operations. Joe thought it was nice of the guy to meet him at the place, even when the young man obviously felt uneasy around the Pale Man. Without speaking, the two men offloaded the car, starting with the two girls. Getting them into the car had been the hardest thing to do. If the cops had stopped his car they would have got a known fugitive and a young woman who would spontaneously combust on arrest, at least when she was brought out into the sunlight.

><br>The two girls took about ten seconds before they started to complain about the new accommodation. The sewer junction was a leftover from the turn of the century, sealed off and discarded when the town outgrew its 'abilities'. It had taken about two months for James Doherty to find a contractor who would clean and renovate the junction with no questions asked. And who wouldn't stay in Sunnydale any longer than necessary. In his rush to finish the job he had left everything from tools to a hose still connected to a tap.

><br>All in all, Joe didn't think that the guy had done a bad job. Looking up from the main floor the junction was a cylinder thirty feet radius inside a cylinder twice sixty feet radius. The outer cylinder was the same height as the inner but it's lower half was sealed off with concrete, turning the upper level into a series of rooms. The inner cylinder had a smooth concrete floor that was

covered by large mismatched rugs and some old furniture. The usual home entertainment kit lay packed in boxes to one side. Joe knew that the five rooms upstairs were a lot better looking than this, as per his instructions.

><br>Xander kept piling the boxes beside the 'front door', a heavy steel job that led into a fifty-foot long corridor to the inner cylinder. Walking up the stairs to his own room he had time to think.

><br>\* I have to call this place something other than cylinder or sewer or the girls will go nuts. \*

><br>Joe finished looking around and went to help Xander with the last of the gear only to find that he had unloaded it all. He was sitting on one of the chairs, messing with the Pale Man's crossbow. Joe let him work on the weapon, knowing that he would have to work for a week to get it shooting straight again. If it missed its target by a foot at ten feet then what use was it.

><br>Xander quit fiddling with the thing for a few seconds and looked at it with a puzzled expression. Joe could see his mind working for a few seconds before he went back to work with it. A minute later he drew back to string and loaded a bolt.

><br>"The middle wardrobe. Centre-centre."

><br>Joe smirked as the kid called his shot. The grin vanished as the bolt hit home dead-on.

><br>"How in the almighty fuck did you do that?"

><br>All Xander could do was shrug.

><br>"I remember something like that crossbow before but not much."

><br>Joe sat down across from Xander and pulled his chair forward. He looked at his guest and saw that he was slightly uncomfortable.

><br>"I know that I make you uncomfortable. I'm sorry about that. But at the moment I need everyone to be comfortable because when we go head to head with Wilkins we all need to be cool with each other."

><br>Xander nodded. He took a deep breath and launched into his story.

><br>"Halloween. Ethan Rayne cast a spell that turned people into the people that they were dressed as. I was dressed as a soldier. I got all the memories and everything."

><br>Joe snorted when he heard the cliff notes recap. He knew that if he asked a few more questions he'd get the full story but he didn't really need it. What he needed was this young man to trust him.

><br>"I am going to give you something. You can use it if you want to. It's up to you."

><br>Walking over to the pile of boxes he grabbed the one he hand packed by him. Tugging it by the corner he lifted it over to the sofa and sat down again.

><br>"Before I give this to you I just want to give you a bit of historical background."

><br>The Pale Man lifted out the crystals he had used on the Slayers. He placed the multi-coloured one on the ground at his feet and kept the darker one in his hands.

><br>"You've probably held a crystal up and seen the light shining through it throw a rainbow onto the ground. A long time ago it was found that crystals did the same for certain types of magic, and only certain types of ways. Some crystals can be used as lenses to look through and see magic fields. Some can be used like my beepers, to detect the presence of demons."

><br>Joe turned the crystal over and over in his hand.



><br>"This crystal was shaped by the Aztecs well over a millennia ago. They discovered that this crystal could funnel the energy of a dying man into a living or injured man. But they found that the crystal was usually unfocused and transported the injuries or sickness as well. So they shaped this bit of metal around it and focused a spell on it. They could then use the spell to transfer injuries or life energy or whatever they wished simply by making a chant and referring to whatever they wanted done."

><br>He handed the crystal to Xander and picked up the one he had used on Faith.

><br>"This crystal is different. It was cut to produce a shape that would pull at the mind of a person. The crystal would focus the most traumatic or intense memories and play them back. If the patient has the energy to survive and the will to live they will. If they give up then they die. This crystal can heal or kill."

><br>He gave this second crystal to Xander and took a third from the box. It was tiny, about the size of three quarter dollar coins placed one on top of another. Pale blue in colour, it was nothing compared to the splendour of the other two crystals.

><br>"This is for you. It was used to focus the minds of young mages. It allowed them to calm their minds and call on memories from when they were almost babies. It is probably the oldest crystal I have."

><br>He threw it into Xander's hands. Xander held it out in front of him in the palm of his hand. Joe could sense the hesitation.

><br>"All you have to do is look at the crystal and relax. Just remember the feelings that you had when you were the soldier. If you use this about once a week for about a year the memories will stay with you forever."

><br>The hesitation left Xander's eyes and he gripped the crystal hard for a minute. Joe looked on as Xander opened his fist and gazed into the stone with a level of concentration that he had seen on few people. The Pale Man stood and walked away quietly. He knew that even the shortest amount of time spent using that crystal would take at least an hour.

><br>Once he had walked out of Xander's line of sight, Joe started to worry. He knew that had tipped his hand and probably too early in the game. At this moment the Mayor still held the majority of the playing cards and the worst one he could use would be the public. One little press conference identifying Joe as the wanted murderer of the Doherty family and any chance of helping to stop the Ascension would go up in smoke. Something needed to be done and quickly. And the first thing would be to remove the Mayor's power base.

><br>A glimmer of an idea burst in flame.

><br>"Woo-hoo!!"

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe unpacked the TV in record time. Installing Faith in front of it he gave her one order: keep an eye out for any newscast that had either of them in it. If she saw something she was to shout for him and keep shouting until he came.

><br>It was late morning by now but Joe felt good enough about what he had to do next. Wrapping Ash up in as much protection as possible he sent her into the sewers on a little vampire hunt. Her orders were also fairly clear: capture two vampires, or at least immobilise them until he could help pick them up. And that immediately brought up a problem. He could stay here and react to the Mayor's and the police's press conference or he could go with Willow.

><br>Xander solved the problem.

><br>With an almighty roar he came out of his trance. He stood still

for all of a second before running up to Joe and grabbing him in a hug.

><br>"It worked. I remember everything. Everything."

><br>The energy bled off as quickly as it came and he fell back to the ground. Joe could only smile and let him lay there. He turned to Ash.

><br>"If you can, take him with you and get our houseguests. Alive..."

><br>She grinned at him. Then he remembered what the houseguests were.

><br>"...well you know what I mean."

><br>He left the vampire and her new hunting buddy and turned his attention back to Faith. She was still watching the TV, flicking between channels. He flicked open his phone and dialled a number. His call got a quick response.

><br>"Massey's."

><br>"I'm looking for Bernie."

><br>"One sec. By the way, who will say is asking?"

><br>"Joey Doherty."

><br>There was silence on the other end of the line for a second.

><br>"I heard that you had a party that went bad."

><br>Joe's lips tightened at the reference to the Doherty's deaths.

><br>"Yeah, it was a bummer. One of the guys got out of hand and the booze and crap got spilt all over the house. But I want to throw a bigger party at his place."

><br>"Listen, Bernie will need to call you back. Got a number."

><br>Joe reeled off the number of a payphone down the road.

><br>"He'll call you back tomorrow."

><br>"Thanks."

><br>Joe hung up and ran over to his coat. Throwing it on he left the phone with Faith and ran for the door. He stopped by Xander for a second and looked at him thoughtfully for a second. He gave a quick snort and then ran.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe got back to his new home a while later to find all of his guests present. The two new additions were laying in a pile on the floor, dripping with scum and crud from the sewer.

><br>"Did you have to drop them on the floor like that? We are going to have to live here for a while. Take them into the corridor and wait until dark, then hose them off."

><br>Xander grabbed both vampires by the scruff of the neck and dragged them out into the corridor. Joe took a sniff as they went by and cocked an eyebrow at Ash.

><br>"We sort of guessed that they'd stink the place up so we used that free aftershave in your room on them. And you should know that you could have sent Xander after them alone he was that good. Not even the Xander in my reality had those moves."

><br>The last few words were said in a tone that Joe caught. Sadness.

><br>"How... who turned Xander?"

><br>"I did."

><br>Joe nodded. It was time to change the subject.

><br>"Faith, anything about us?"

><br>"No. Nothing."

><br>The Slayer looked a lot better than she had the night before. Under Ash's supervision she had cleaned up and got rid of the Goth

wannabe look. She caught him looking and grinned. He held out his hand for the phone. He rang the school.  
><br>"Giles. I need you to get ready to collect a package. I'm having it delivered to the front of the school. I'll be there to pick it up as soon as I can."  
><br>He hung up before the Watcher had a chance to ask any questions. Xander came back from the corridor shaking his hands in the air to get the crap off them. Joe grabbed him by the elbow.  
><br>"Get upstairs and get cleaned. We have to make a quick pick up just outside of town."  
><br>Ash and Faith turn around and look at Joe.  
><br>"I thought, we thought that Giles was getting your package."

><br>Joe had to smirk.  
><br>"I think that the Mayor has ordered the cops to watch for me and anyone who has had contact with me. That includes all of the Gang. So, if they got that message they HAVE to act on it, even if they think it's bogus. Right, Xander, lets go."  
><br>\*\*\*\*\*  
><br>Xander drove the car along the motorway staying within the speed limit. Joe sat in the back, staying low until they managed to pass the city limits and out of the Mayor's reach. Once that happened he pulled himself into the passenger seat and directed his driver to the first rest stop they found. Parking between two unloaded trucks they waited.  
><br>"We wait here."  
><br>"I... Thank you for this."  
><br>Xander held up the crystal. Joe gave him a gentle smile.

><br>"In all the thousand plus years that I've had that crystal I've only had to use it once. And if I needed its abilities any other time I've had a more powerful crystal or device hanging around. So don't worry."  
><br>Both of them looked around for a minute.  
><br>"I have to ask. If you got turned into a soldier what did the others get turned into?"  
><br>"Cordelia was wearing a cat suit put she didn't turn. Buffy was dressed as an 18th century noblewoman and Willow was the ghost of a hooker."  
><br>Joe couldn't help himself. He started to laugh at the thought of a hooker's ghost. A few seconds later and he collapsed against the car holding his sides in pain.  
><br>"The ghost of a hooker. Please tell me you got some pictures."

><br>Xander had a big grin on his face that only got wider. Joe wiped his eyes and kept giggling. A few more minutes passed and they both managed to calm down. The Pale Man checked his mobile phone again. His smile vanished. This would be the perfect time for the Mayor to pull some stunt and screw his chances altogether. A horn beeped across the lot and the thoughts of the Mayor were pushed aside.

><br>A dirty blue van crunched to a halt beside Joe's jeep. The side door opened to reveal a pair of heavily built men. Both of them had their hands inside their jackets.  
><br>\* Subtle. \*, thought Joe.  
><br>"Bernie."  
><br>The nearer of the two men tapped the driver of the van on the shoulder. It's engine cut out and the two in the back hopped out, dragging a heavy duffel with them and threw it into the Jeep. Joe handed across an unsigned credit card. A gold card. Nothing was said

as the two men got back in the van and drove away. The Pale Man and Xander got into their own transportation and left.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>It took a half hour to get back to the Pit, as Joe now called his own private sewer junction. Every second was torture as could only hope and pray that his mobile wouldn't ring telling him that the cops were looking for him. Xander helped distract him.

><br>"I don't want to be nosy but how do you know the director of the FBI?"

><br>It was the right question to distract Joe with.

><br>"I'll tell you a little story.

><br>A long time ago the FBI had undercover men in pretty dangerous places and not all of them were American. If any of them were in need of aid they were screwed. Then this smart kid thinks up something. What if the agents were given a number to ring and a name to say? Once they say the name help is sent.

><br>The idea caught on and evolved. The FBI generated a list of names, four in all, that would be given to certain agents. If you called in and gave one of those names the FBI will do everything short of declaring war on a country to help you. Of course you'd have to explain where you got the name."

><br>"And you have the names."

><br>Joe just crossed his arms and leant back, basking in Xander's awe.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The duffel bag held a number of surprising things.

><br>A pair of Ithaca combat shotguns with fifty shells. An M-16 with a silencer, scope and ten magazines. Four 9mm Berettas with fifteen round magazines. A couple of plastic bags of something stiff. And lots of ammo.

><br>Xander looked at the little arsenal and whistled.

><br>"I can sort of guess who you're declaring war on but you can't exactly use these without being labelled major league criminal by everyone."

><br>Joe picked up one of the Berettas and loaded it with quick and easy movements.

><br>"The trick, grasshopper, is to put the bad guy in the situation where no-one cares if you use these on him."

><br>The Pale Man loaded another gun and took both out into the corridor.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The vampires were less than comfortable. Xander and Ash had only been able to find the one set of chains that Joe had and so they had got creative when they hooked their prey together. It was a sort of his leg to his arm and his other arm around the first guys neck. It all went downhill after that. Another thing that didn't help was that both of them stank to hell. They both looked up in fear at Joe until they saw the guns in his hands.

><br>"Stupid human. Those can't hurt us."

><br>"Don't you think I know that. If you want pain I can cart a couple of gallons of holy water, a few crosses and a pair of stakes over here and have a nice old torture session for myself. But that's not why I'm here."

><br>Joe unchained both vampires' hands.

><br>"I have a little business proposition..."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe came back into the Pit a few minutes later with a satisfied expression on his face. Ash and Faith, having seen this expression, and in the time honoured fashion of all women, decided to burst his bubble. The Slayer started first.

><br>"This may be a step above some of the places I've lived in but it's lacking in a fairly important department. Food."  
><br>The vampire stuck her opinion in.  
><br>"And unless you want us to starve or get by on snacking..."

><br>She gave Xander's neck a hungry look.  
><br>"... you had better do some grocery shopping. Now."  
><br>Joe wasn't stupid. Eleven hundred years of living does hone a person's survival instincts. He grabbed his coat and ran for the door.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>He was halfway to the shops when he remembered that he didn't know what the girls wanted. It was sort of easy to guess that he might have to make a withdrawal at the bloodbank for Ash but Faith was something altogether. It took five minutes of slugging from the girls over a payphone before they both gave him his orders.

><br>" WOMEN."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> When he got back to the Pit all thoughts of eating had gone from the girls' minds. They were glued to the TV as it ran another sequence of shots in a newsflash. Xander towed him over to the screen and began to tell him as the sequence repeated again.

><br> "This is Angela Klinger of WSTV reporting live from the front of City hall where moments ago the Mayor of Sunnydale, Richard T. Wilkins, was brutally attacked by unknown assailants during a press conference. Bud Jennings, a WSTV cameraman, managed to catch some of the attack on film."

><br>The camera had been set to film the podium that the Mayor was sitting on and it caught the whole thing in perfect sequence. The sound wasn't there but it wasn't necessary. Colour was enough. The first few bullets were flyers, missing by feet and inches, but the next few weren't. The gunmen were visible in the edge of the screen when they started to hit the podium the Mayor had hit behind. The bullets hit home and chewed through the thick wood just as the Mayor dived to the floor. The screen went blank.

><br>"A bystander, Jonas Kethinger, managed to get the attackers on his camcorder."

><br>The remaining camerawork was jerky and badly focused but you could see two people run from across the street just as the Mayor stepped out of the main doors of City Hall. You could see the glint of metal as the two pulled guns from under their jackets. The picture flashed to the pavement as the cameraman dropped but it caught the last few shots before the attackers fled down a manhole.

><br> The newscast continued.

><br> "While it is speculated that the gunmen were gang members, the police refuse to comment this early in the investigation. However, a telephone call to this station by the attackers links the attack on the Mayor to the brutal slaying of the Doherty family... "

><br> Joe sighed and turned the TV off.

><br> "Was anyone hurt?"

><br> Faith fielded the question.

><br> "A few had to be treated for shock but nothing else. Why did you do it?"

><br> He sat down beside the Slayer.

><br> "I did it to show him I could remove the power he had in the town. He can't do anything visible now. He has to move against me as quickly as possible without using the cops. If he tried using them it would draw too much press attention."

><br> "But why?"

><br> "In any war there are two sides, regardless of who is on them

and the rules involved. There are the people who act and the people who react. And the people who win wars are those who act.

><br>By doing this he can only react to whatever I do now and whatever the world throws at him. For the first time in his life he is near powerless and he knows it. He'll lose the support of his vampires if he doesn't act now and with the resources that he has he can only attack us directly."

><br> "But he wasn't bad..."

><br> "To you. But everyone else was expendable. He may have cared for you in some way but you were a weapon to blunt anything that Buffy could throw at him. As long as you worked for him, she could only react. And that is not healthy. I am sorry that you had to see this and I know that I should have told you my intentions. But it was a spur of the moment thing."

><br> Faith nodded. Joe was making sense but sense wasn't what she wanted to hear at the moment. She wanted to lash out. She wanted to thank the Mayor for being so kind to her but a little voice kept telling her 'He was using you! He was using you!' just like The Pale Man had said. She balled her fist up.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe saw the Slayer's anger build. He knew that if she didn't vent it, it would fester and everything he had done to open her up would go to waste.

><br> "How about a workout? Xander, you can check out how much hand to hand you have."

><br> Xander gave his friends a look. He was decidedly a little tadpole in this pond. A Slayer, a vampire and the Pale Man. Against a Recon Marine. He smiled.

><br> \* They don't have a chance. \*

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> They decided to pair off, tag team style. In the interest of fairness Xander went with Faith and Ash stayed with Joe. After a couple of lame attempts to toss a coin, and an even lamer attempt at 'Paper, Rock, Scissors' Xander and Joe stepped up, toe to toe.

><br> A practise mat was rolled out onto the ground and the two lads squared up against each other. The rules were simple. One defends, the other attacks. If one player gives up his partner steps in and the roles are reversed. The game ends when everyone is too tired to go on.

><br> Xander went in on the attack. He swept his leg low and in, missing as Joe jumped up and back. Xander pushed up and kept his spin going, swinging his leg straight for Joe's face. It missed again.

><br> Faith stepped forward and whispered to her partner for a second, getting a little nod in answer. Xander came back onto the mat and bowed before running forward and swinging his fist. Joe blocked the blow easily, but not the foot that hooked his ankle and flipped him onto his back. He thumped the ground in anger and stood aside to let Ash onto the mat.

><br> Joe could see the worry in the young man's eyes, as he looked the vampire over. In every way the girl in front of him was his friend of over fifteen years, except that this one could bleed him dry in seconds. But he couldn't see that. And Ash knew that. She swept into the attack and used her long legs to batter down Xander's defences. A roundhouse kick clipped his jaw and knocked him back off the mat into Faith's arms.

><br> She sat him down on the ground and jumped up, running at her target. Swinging wildly she hit Ash hard on the side of the head, stunning her but not knocking her to the ground. The next blow was

deflected and answered by a snap kick to the stomach. The Slayer grunted and fell to the ground on one knee. When her head came up both men could see the rage on her face but the tears streaming from her eyes told of something else.

><br> Ash was in no better shape. She let her emotions take over and screamed. The pain and anger that she had felt since she had been brought to this world came to the surface and she lunged at Faith.

><br>The Slayer met her charge.

><br>The friendly fight degenerated into a free for all as they swung full force blows at each other. Joe could see it getting out of hand so he ran for the entrance and the hose that was there. Running back in he trained a stream of freezing water on both fighters, knocking them from their feet. They screamed in shock as the cold hit them.

><br>"I think that went a little too far."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Wesley was not a happy man. His relationship with Buffy had never been good, and the only way he could describe the one with Faith was non-existent.

><br> And now he had to report to the Council the developments to date.

><br> He didn't think that they would be happy about the Pale Man and his presence in Sunnydale. Or the fact that Faith had been working for the Mayor, and was now working solely for the Pale Man. And to cap it all off the Chronicles of the Watchers were in the hands of the Pale Man.

><br> Wesley knew that they wouldn't be happy. And their response would reflect that.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Meanwhile, Buffy and the Gang had arrived at the Pit by way of Xander's directions. It took them over an hour to do the few miles but Joe just wanted to be sure that the cops were no longer interested in him.

><br> Giles hadn't been too impressed that afternoon. A strange call from Josephus about a parcel and when it arrived half of the Sunnydale Police Force had come with it. Under the supervision of the Homicide Department the package was opened to reveal a first edition volume of Paradise Lost and other poems. It took the mention of how much the book was worth and the threat of a lawsuit by the insurance company to stop the cops from ripping the book apart.

><br> Seeing the expression on Snyder's face as they failed to bring him out was worth it, though.

><br> Faith greeted them at the front door of the Pit as she called it.

><br> "Hi."

><br> Her face was bruised and she looked like she had just come from a shower. But she looked happy, content with herself. It was far from the 'normal' semi-psychotic Faith that they all knew and feared. It seemed to be a good change.

><br> Another change was Xander. He was fencing with Joe in the centre of the floor. Both were using what seemed to be broom handles and they were putting on some show. Xander was doing moves that normally would have him in a pile on the floor.

><br> "You can't do something like that without..."

><br> "He can't kick that high without..."

><br> The Gang was shocked as the two men performed graceful martial arts moves against each other. The blows that they swung were nothing more than mild taps but the fight was good to watch nonetheless.

><br> It even managed to divert the Gang's attention from the reason for their visit.

><br> "What happened with the Mayor?"

><br> The fight stopped and both fighters dropped to the floor and let their sticks fall beside them. Breathing heavily, Joe stood up again and answered Buffy's question.

><br> "The Mayor was untouchable in his position as Mayor. If you tried to move in on him he could use the cops against you by day and his vampires at night. He could set you up with drugs, robberies or any number of things and all you could do would be prison time. What I did was make absolutely sure that the Mayor can only rely on his vampires now. There is no way that he can play down or disregard what happened this morning.

><br> Now if you don't mind, I am going to have a shower."

><br> Buffy grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

><br> "People could have been hurt."

><br> "I made it very clear to the guys I used that they were to shoot only at one person. The Mayor. And if they hit anyone, they wouldn't get paid."

><br> "Paid?"

><br> "Greed is sometimes a very good thing. It encourages just the right amount of loyalty. Ten thousand dollars ensures a large amount of loyalty and that my orders would be followed. Now, if you'll excuse me."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe heard the fight, the verbal one anyway, start as soon as he got in the door of the bathroom. Shutting the door behind him took the edges off the words so he could only hear a dull roar. Turning on the tap covered that.

><br> Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, Joe sank his head down onto his hands and just stayed there. His mind kept flitting back to the news broadcast and the shooting. He kept playing through the responses the Mayor could have come up with, but none could work. He had stood at that podium and said who he was and everything and nearly got cut to pieces by a couple of guys with nines. A nice gang shooting would fit in well with the official criminal history of the town.

><br> But Joe still felt sick. For as long as he had lived he had used a set of principles that had changed only to fit the fight that he had to fight. And he had never done an assassination. Or used vampires. He had killed small armies and virtually depopulated some countries, but those had been clear enemies who had gone against the rest of humanity. This... shooting had nearly hurt some innocent people.

><br> \* Enough. I'll pay off those two and if I ever deal with a vampire again...\*

><br> And brought him up short.

><br> Ash.

><br> In the few days that he had known the vampire he had got to know her well. She was very intelligent and funny and it didn't hurt that she had a fairly nice body. Faith was the same but more of a blunt instrument. You could point her in the direction of a target and say 'Smash' and she would do it without asking why.

><br> \* I have to change that aspect of her. Get her into a situation where she needs knowledge more than Slaying abilities. More problems.

\*

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe spent the better part of half an hour in the shower before he came back down to the Gang. He was surprised to find that everyone was still alive. Including Ash, sort of. Both of his guests were



sitting apart from the group, isolated by Buffy from what he could see. He had to single her out.

><br> " Buffy. We need to talk. Alone."

><br> He walked back up into the rooms. After giving Giles a quick look as if to say 'I'll be all right' she followed the Pale Man into his room.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> Joe stood toe to toe with the Slayer

><br> "I am sick of telling you that Faith is no longer your responsibility. And Ash is also. You will not question their loyalties again. If you have any problems you discuss them with me. And if you have a problem with my tactics you take it out on me not them. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD!!!"

><br> He couldn't help but shout the last sentence at her. She was pissing him off with her attitude towards Faith and the loss of Angel. He had to calm down and reason this out with her.

><br> "This is very simple. We have to work together until the Mayor is dealt with and then I will be gone. And if the two girls want to go with me then you'll have even fewer things to worry about after. All I am here to do is stop the Mayor and then I'm history, just another nightmare conjured up by Sunnydale and it's Hellmouth."

><br> She could only describe the emotion she was feeling as 'pure seething anger'. The Pale Man, Josephus or whatever the fuck he was called, had made sense but that didn't matter. She needed to hit out at something, anything, just to feel them buckle as she pounded down on them.

><br> And then the image of 'them' came to her. Angelus, Faith, the Master, the Mayor and all the other monsters and scum that had ruined her life over the past few years. She had only wanted a real life and she loaded with this crap. She had trusted Faith, and Angel and got stabbed in the back.

><br> \* NO MORE!!!! \*

><br> He could hear her muttering to herself and that was not a good sign. If she was pissed about something and she kept going over it herself she would blow whatever it was out of proportion. And that would make her unpredictable, which would be more of a problem to him rather than the Mayor. The next few minutes would be used to map out a plan of attack against the Mayor and if the Slayer screwed it up because of personal feelings then the shit would hit the fan.

><br> The Pale Man knew he had to do something.

><br> "Buffy. I'm sorry that I shouted at you but I've had a bad few days. I lost some people that I promised to protect and I have to make up for that. And I had to do something that I'm not exactly proud of. But I know that if I don't keep in control of my emotions right up until the moment that control doesn't matter anymore then I will win the fight against the Mayor."

><br> Buffy was shaking her head. Before she could say anything he stopped her.

><br> "Have you ever seen the film 'The Godfather'?"

><br> "Yeah. A bunch of guys doing the Mafia thing, horses head and all that."

><br> Joe nodded. He smiled to himself because he had distracted her for a moment.

><br> "The piece I like the best is where all the Corleones are discussing the hit on the cop and the cop's Mafia boss. Michael says he'll do it but his older brother laughs at him. But Michael just says that this is 'Business, nothing personal'. Well this is just the same. We have to keep feelings out of it just until the moment where we tighten our fingers on the trigger and then that's it. We do the

job and walk away. All we get out of it is the satisfaction that we did what we did. And that the other guy is just a red mist and some cop has to fill out a shitload of forms. That-is-it."

><br> Buffy wasn't shaking her head anymore. He knew that his little speech had paid off. It was common sense and giving it to her in the form of a story had paid off bigtime.

><br> "Right. Okay. We do this and you leave. And you take them with you."

><br> "Fine."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The Gang gathered around as Buffy and Joe rejoined them.

><br> "It's very simple, people. We are here to design a plan to take out the Mayor. We have to work around the fact that we know nothing about the forces that he has with him and that he can truly screw us if we aren't successful. We also have to take into account that he can call on conventional forces if he has the chance, so we have to move quick."

><br> Buffy nodded, as did everyone else. Joe kept going.

><br> "The Mayor would have ID'ed the two shooters as vampires and had his people pick them up. He knows or he'll find out about this place and will make a move against it as soon as possible. He also knows that if he makes a move against us using the cops he can expect a repeat of this morning except I won't miss. So he'll just use his vampires."

><br> Joe stopped speaking to catch his breath. No one bothered to ask questions.

><br> "Faith said that he has at least forty vampires with him but I doubt he'll use all of them at once. Whether he does or not this is what I want done. Directly outside of here is an empty lot. To the left as you go out there is a two-story building. I need Xander, Buffy and Oz up there. Giles, Cordelia, Faith and Willow, you four are going to be on the other side of town starting a fire in an empty factory. I'm going to give you some stuff that will liven it up and pull every cop in town as well as the fire department. Ash and I are going to be in here on our own when the Mayor arrives. And when he does I want his day to really end badly."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The Mayor was pretty much in the same emotional state as Buffy. He had dealt with the shooting in the way a normal person would, at least the way a politician would. After refusing to go to the hospital in case he was suffering from shock, he returned to his office and started to rant.

><br> Sunday just stood and watched him. Ever since she had come under his wing, she and her little brood had expanded his army to little over fifty vampires. And in return he had given her a toy.

><br>Angelus.

><br>It wasn't often that a vampire as old as Angelus fell so low but when it happened, younger vampires could profit greatly from it. While the blood of a vampire is dead and not sustaining it contains the demonic energy of the elder. If a vampire is able to hold down the blood it can acquire the energy of decades of 'living' in minutes. And Sunday had been more than able to hold it down, as had a couple of her lieutenants.

><br>"Sir. Mister Mayor. You have to accept that the Pale Man is the one who did this..."

><br>"I know that, you silly child."

><br>"... and you have to deal with it. I doubt that he will use people who will miss next time."

><br>"What do you mean?"

><br>Sunday smiled.

><br>"We had people near you when the two attacked you. When they went into the sewers we caught one, but missed the other. The one we had was more than willing to tell us what we wanted to know."

><br>Sunday paused, looking for praise. It would be a long time in coming.

><br>"I think the wood house is looking like a good career move for you."

><br>The vampire stepped back in fear. But she continued.

><br>"The vampire that we caught told us that the Pale Man has a new base in the old section of town. We did some checking and there appears to be an abandoned sewer works and some other buildings there. From the description it is most likely that the sewer junction is the new base."

><br>The Mayor looked at the ceiling. Sunday could see his eyes glaze over.

><br>"I remember that place. A miracle of modern science. For the nineteen hundred's that is. Very well, take the boys and destroy the place. I have had enough of the Pale Man and his friends. And that reminds me. If you see any of the 'Scooby Gang' you can kill them too."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br>The Gang had split just like Joe had asked. Giles, Willow, Cordelia and Faith had done a little bit of shopping for what they would need. Each of the 'Fire Team', as they called themselves, split up to do the shopping. The gear they bought, batteries, electrical tape, timers and the rest all looked innocent purchased separately but if they were got together alarms would ring and that part of the plan would go to hell.

> <br>Xander, Buffy and Oz got their part of the plan done as quickly as they could. Taking most of Joe's 'holy water' bombs, a couple of stakes as well as the guns that they would need. Xander went up there to keep watch and to make sure the gear didn't have an accident.

> <br>Joe had the hardest part. As in the way of good leaders the entire world over he had covered all the bases as

>best he could and in the process he had nothing left to do but get the last player in place. If Wesley had even bothered to turn up he could have been the punching bag.<br>

>"Could I speak to the Mayor please? My name is Archer Dale."<br>

>About a second passed before Joe got what he wanted.<br>

>"Good afternoon, Mister Dale. How can I help you?"<br>

> Joe could almost hear the quotation marks around the Dale. But mentioning the name drew the rules for this game.<br> "I know that it is probably a bad time to talk to you considering this morning but I aim to raise your sights and  
>hopes."<br>

>Joe would know that if this were being recorded nothing would come from it. But the Mayor knew that he was behind the shooting and wouldn't appreciate the shooting terms.<br>

>"There's no problem. I always say that bowing to the scum who employ these tactics are not worth the worry expended on them."<br>

>"I agree wholeheartedly, sir. To change the subject, we here at Barton Cole managed to come across a find that you <br>might appreciate. A friend of yours said that you might be interested. Ethan Rayne."

><br> Another pause on behalf of the Mayor. Joe jumped in before he could start.

> <br>"I know that he was acquiring items for you in Ireland and I was sorry to hear about his untimely passing but this  
>field of ours sometimes gets rough. But I believe you would be interested in these works."<br>  
>Joe knew that the Mayor's mind would be ticking in overdrive at the moment, working out all the angles.<br>  
>"We should meet."<br>  
>"Yes sir we should. My scheduling is restricting me at the moment. I'll probably be out of the office for most of<br>the day but you'll probably be able to find me one way or another. Good day sir."

><br>He threw the mobile onto the ground and went back into the Pit and sat on the couch. It had been turned to face  
>the entrance as more of a distraction than anything else. He had Ash in the room upstairs, with a shotgun and holy water <br>bombs. Xander had spent the better part of an hour training her on how best to hold the shotgun and to fire it. Testing it  
>was out of the question. <br>  
>Joe could only keep looking at his watch ever few seconds until sundown had come and gone. He could only depend on the Mayor to be punctual. And the politician was in character.<br>  
> Almost to the second, the Mayor arrived at the Pit and dressed in his usual manner. Joe had either met the greatest <br>optimist in the world or someone who probably didn't give a shit anymore.  
> <br>Wilkins made the first move.  
> <br>"So I finally meet the great Pale Man. I've known Ethan Rayne for some time through our mutual... hobbies. He  
>really went on about you for some times. To have your knowledge, your abilities. I could only think."<br>  
>"That's nice. Now we've got the general greeting crap out of the way could we get to the money bit?"<br>  
>"What were you thinking about?"<br>  
>"You owe me for the following. The damage to the house that Rayne torched when he stole the book. The four people who had to be hospitalised when the place burnt down. The books that went up with the house. The money I spent tracking Rayne down. The Doherty's and their house. And speaking of the Dohertys, which one of your people did the deed. Angelus or another of yours."<br>  
>"I knew that we would come to him sooner or later. Angelus was not involved in the deed as you call it. Actually I <br>was thinking of giving you the vampire as a part payment."  
> <br>Joe caught the flinch in the young vampire that was beside the Mayor. And the Mayor caught it too.  
> <br>"My young friend here has been entertaining our guest. And just in case you accepted I'm having him delivered  
>here."<br>  
>"I can guess."<br>  
>"So can we discuss the money value."<br>  
>Joe sat forward and eased a sword from under the couch. It was a heavy blade from the Napoleonic wars. It had <br>none of the polish of a Japanese katana or a Damascus blade but it would do the job of a sword. Kill.  
> <br>"Since you seem willing to pay for damages, I was thinking that the amounts of money we'll be talking about aren't really easily taken out of bank accounts I thought that you might pay some other way. I was thinking of property and the four warehouses at the edge of town. The ones you own. And the ones that are burning down as we speak."  
> <br>The Mayor's face fell and he jerked out his mobile phone. Joe shook his head.

> <br>"It won't work down here. The walls are too thick. And you should know that clear evidence of arson will be found. As well as the fact that you personally ordered the insurance upped on all your properties. Including those."  
> <br>Joe's grin widened.  
> <br>"I think that even cops as dense as the ones in this town will have to act on this. And when you disappear it will  
>be an even better indication that you are guilty."<br>  
>The Mayor's vampire assistant and her cohorts pulled out weapons. They knew that Joe's statement meant that they <br>would have to die and they had to act. Joe held up an empty hand.  
> <br> "Since I can see that violence is en route could you do me a favour and tell me which ones killed the Dohertys."  
> <br>The cute undead assistant waved her gun.  
> <br>"I did."  
> <br>"Thanks."  
> <br>Joe's hand now held a mini-Uzi that fired on full automatic. The recoil jerked the weapon from left to right  
>across the vampires and the Mayor shocking them and forcing them back. But it was more of a signal than anything else.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>  
>Xander heard the vampires coming before he saw them. It had take a lot of restraint to stop shooting the Mayor and <br>his little group but with the signal from Joe he could stop the waiting. The vampires crossed the small empty plot. And they  
>had a surprise with them. <br>  
>Angelus.<br>  
>The vampire was in chains being dragged on foot by a couple of vamped out demons. Xander heard a scuffle beside him and saw Oz wrestling with Buffy. Xander stopped the scuffle with a touch on the Slayer's arm. Putting his mouth as close to possible to Buffy's ear he whispered.<br>  
>"If you go down there now we lose. We stick to the plan but when we toss the bombs you wait until I've shot the two with Angel and then you go get him and then start staking the vampires. I'll cover you."<br>  
>He waited until the Slayer nodded and relaxed before he let go of her arm. They all grabbed their holy water bombs <br>and waited to crack the pins. They didn't have to wait long. Once the tearing-cloth sound of the Uzi sounded the three  
>acted. The bombs started to hiss out their payload as the pins were tripped and the three tossed their payload. And all hell <br>broke loose.  
> <br>As soon as Xander let go the bombs he went for his gun. The M-16 had a scope mounted on it and was loaded with special rounds called Glasers. These were bullets designed for one purpose: to kill. Normal bullets can wound and in most cases you have a fair chance of living if they hit you. Glasers have a ninety-nine percent kill guarantee. The one  
>percent was considered a fluke. <br> As Xander looked through the scope he could see that the holy water was doing the trick. Most of the vampires were stumbling around in agony, blindly trying to make their way out of the mist. He swung the sight picture over to the two holding Angelus and saw that the mist had not reached them. He sighted on the farthest one and pulled the trigger. The bullets did the trick.  
> <br>The second of Angelus' captors looked on in shock as his fellow jailer was cut down. He stayed in shock for about  
>two seconds before Xander shot him down.<br>

> The Slayer hit the ground running. She hit her first target, kneeling the helpless vampire in the face. As it reared <br>back she staked it and moved on. Its scream of pain didn't warn the other vampires of its fate.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br>Buffy glanced to where Angelus was lying on the ground. It looked as if he had been pulled down when his

>jailers had fallen courtesy of Xander. It didn't look like he would be getting up soon. She spared one more free thought and <br>that was for Joe.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

> <br>Joe's fight was going well. Ash had lobbed in most of her supply of holy water bombs causing predictable results. The closed quarters made the mist last longer but for some reason it didn't go above waist height. It was hurting them but not as much as hoped.

><br>As soon as he had fired the Uzi he dropped the gun. Pulling one of the remaining pistols from a shoulder holster

>and let loose a round into the nearest vampire before swinging his sword for it's neck. It disappeared in a cascade of dust. <br>

>The vampires kept coming.<br>

> The next few came in a group, one ahead of its two companions. Joe emptied the last of the gun's magazine into the <br>leaders face and then dropped it. As the two behind stumbled Joe swung the sword two handed and dusted all three with one

>massive blow. And stared into the muzzle of Sunday's gun pointing straight at his face.<br>

>\*\*\*\*\*<br>

>Ash saw Joe move and fire the last few bullets in his gun before killing the three vampires. And she had seen Sunday bring up her gun. Trying to remember everything that Xander had taught her only a few hours ago she pulled the shotgun to her shoulder and fired. <br>

> A chunk of wall disappeared behind Sunday's head causing her to flinch. Joe took advantage of the loss of focus <br>and stabbed forward, spitting the vampire on the sword. Punching her in the face he knocked her to the ground, knocking her off the blade.

> <br> And then he turned Pale Man.

><br> The vampires kept coming, even in the face of his change. One grabbed his arm and was smashed headfirst into the wall for his troubles. Black blood and concrete mixed before it slid to the floor. Another swung its own sword only to get it broken in half and it's skull broken on the backswing.

><br> But they still kept coming.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>The Mayor stood back into the protection of the corridor but could still see the battle. Of the ten he had brought with him into the junction only four were standing whole. Small piles of ash decorated the floor along with the maimed vampires that had been unlucky to live through an attack. Another boom from one of the doorways and another vampire was shot down before it could backstab the Pale Man.

><br>The Mayor looked up at the sniper and saw the outline of a girl, silhouetted by the light behind her. The red tinge in her hair struck a cord and the Mayor shouted out to the last of his people.

><br>"Get the girl."

><br>The three surviving vampires jumped back from the Pale Man and ran for the stairs to the upper level. Josephus ran after them when he saw their intent but stopped to face the Mayor.

><br>"You just made a mistake."

><br>The Mayor looked back at his vampires as they reached the upper level. The first demon's foot hit the top step and died as a shotgun blast took its head off. The other two didn't wait for the ashes to settle before converging on the door. Running in together, they met the final shell between them before the shotgun butt smashed down onto the first one's head. One snarled and reached for a fragile looking neck.

><br>That was a stupid mistake.

><br>A snarl broke loose from his victim to be just as he touched her skin and he felt a powerful kick land in his gut then the sensation of flying. The last thing he saw was the smiling face of the Pale Man as his sword met the vampire's flight.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Willow the vampire had been created by the Master, one of his first victims when Luke managed to free him. Xander had fallen to her less than a week later, followed quickly by the untimely death of Luke when he tripped onto a wooden crate. The Master had smiled when she had told him what happened. E knew that greed and ambition fuelled his vampires, especially the breed that he created. And he had created something powerful when Willow had been reborn. A creature with an almost unlimited hate and anger.

><br>Ash let the anger take over when she saw the vampires rush her. Waiting until the vampires were close she cut loose the last shells and then used the gun as a club. It couldn't be used as anything else and besides, Xander had said that the chances of her reloading were nil.

><br>It was only when she felt the touch on her neck and the last few shreds of control vanished. With as powerful a kick as she could muster she sent the vampire clear out of the room and over the rail beyond the door. She turned her attention to the last one and began to rain blows down on it.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Joe felt the ashes from the next to last vampire settle around him like black snowflakes. He closed his eyes to feel their touch for a second before he head a shoe scrape against a wall in front of him.

><br>"Mister Mayor. I am already pissed at you so running is not going to help."

><br>The Pale Man ran after his quarry and grabbed the man's coat tails just as he pushed the door to the outside open. A shocked gasp escaped his lips at the sight.

><br>The Mayor had sent all fifty-eight of his vampires against the Pale Man, and from what he could see a few were left. The Slayer was fighting one, knocking it down with repeated blows to the head before breaking its sword and plunging the stub into its side. The Mayor's heart leapt for one second when he saw a vampire lift a sword above the Slayer's neck. When he saw it smashed down by some unseen force he could only scream. The Pale Man was pulling him further back into the sewer junction and away from the only help he had. Then he saw a small bit of hope.

><br>"ANGELUS."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>For the first time since he had regained his freedom from that soul, Angelus was without pain. He rolled from side to side, dislodging the limp hands of each of the unconscious vampires beside him. They would not regain consciousness until their bodies were healed and that would never happen with the Slayer being so close. As much as he would like to kill the Slayer himself he couldn't risk getting shot by the sniper who had killed the others.

><br>Free of the vampires, Angelus tensed and sat up as quickly as he could. Using the forward momentum he first kneeled and then stood. And then he ran as fast as he could. He knew that the sniper was too involved in keeping an eye on Buff's back so he had a chance.

><br>And that chance disappeared when he heard his name being shouted.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Xander heard the shout and took his eye from the scope to see what the problem was. It took all of a second to spot the fleeing vampire and swing the gun in his direction. Setting up for the shot he didn't even hear Oz shout out Buffy's name in warning.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Buffy heard the shout just as the sword-wielding vampire hit the ground beside her. It was one of a dozen saves that Xander had made on her so far.

><br>But the shout distracted her for one second. And one second was enough for the vampire at her feet to pull the broken sword from its side and plunge it into her leg, ripping a massive hole in the process. Buffy screamed in agony.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Xander primed the shot and thought for all of a second about what was about to happen. He fired one shot into the running vampires back and saw Angelus fall squirming onto the ground.

><br>\* He won't be getting up too soon. \*

><br>And then he heard the scream.

><br>He saw Buffy fall to the ground with a massive tear in her leg. He twisted around and brought the rifle to bear on the vampire rising above his friend. He emptied the six rounds into the demon before it clicked on an empty chamber. Ten seconds later a new magazine was in and Xander fired half of it into the vampire. A flicker of movement in the doorway caught his eye and he saw the Mayor's head but he couldn't take the shot.

><br>Dropping the M-16 to the ground, Xander grabbed the last of the weapons Joe had bought and jumped to the ground with Oz not far behind. He stood over the Slayer as Oz rigged a tourniquet around her leg.

><br>The Mayor was lying on the ground with Joe kneeling on his back, sword in hand. Ash came up behind him and hugged the Pale Man hard. Joe's skin lost the pallor and he grinned at the vampire.

><br>It was over.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br>Well, sort of.

><br>Ash dragged Angelus back over to the entrance and stood over the unconscious vampire. The Mayor was right beside him bound and gagged in duct tape, the only thing left to tie him up with. Giles and the Fire Team arrived about an hour later. The Watcher stayed for one minute before loading Buffy into his battered Citroen and driving to the hospital. Faith spent a long time looking down at her ex-boss before walking away.

><br>Everyone else gathered in the Pit and tried to tidy it for a second then gave up. Joe was leaving as soon as possible and this place was going to go to crap. They all filed up to the bedrooms and lay down for a while.

><br>Joe threw on a coat and went to a payphone. He talked for a few minutes in Irish and hung up. He stayed by the phone for two hours before a large truck pulled up beside him. Grabbing onto the wing mirror he guided it to the Pit.



><br> A group of middle aged men in suits got out with a couple of younger men in work overalls. Joe brought the suits over to Mayor and pointed to him. The Mayor got the general meaning of the gesture.

><br> Here is the criminal. Judge him.

><br> The younger men unloaded bricks and a six-foot length of sewer pipe. A couple of minutes later they were ready.

><br> Joe went in ahead to the Pit and up to the bedrooms. It took a while to wake everyone up but he got it done. He gave them all the one speech.

><br> "I'm going to take care of the Mayor. It's not going to be painful or anything, just very fatal. You'll need to go now, you have classes in the morning."

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> The Gang left and didn't look back. They were too tired after the adrenaline rush of the action and they didn't really care about the Mayor one way or another.

><br> Joe sat down in the dirt beside the Mayor.

><br> "Mister Wilkins. You wouldn't be in this position if you hadn't killed the Doherty family. I would have let the Ascension go ahead and you could have levelled Sunnydale. Or tried to. I'd say that you had less than a fifty-fifty chance with Buffy being around.

><br> But anyway. Back to the matter at hand. You killed the Dohertys and you have to pay for that. So what I have suggested is this: we are going to let the Ascension go ahead and you are going to kill yourself in the process."

><br> Joe stood and pulled the Mayor up beside him and tugged him into the Pit. The young men had finished the first part of their work.

><br> The sewer pipe was standing up straight in the centre of the floor. A small box of bricks and cement held it straight and steady in place. Loops of wire and greyish brown bricks labelled 'C-4' were tied around it. Two of the men grabbed him by the legs and lifted him into the pipe. He struggled against them but nothing could stop them. Joe started talking to him again.

><br> "I told them all I know about the Ascension and they let me impose the sentence. I know that you can't be hurt or killed at the moment but I know that that invulnerability ends when you become a true demon. So when you grow to full size you'll crack the pipe and set off the bomb and end of story. Goodbye, Mayor Wilkins."

><br> He turned to the men.

><br> "Cover him up to the neck. Do not remove the tape on his mouth. Once you have finished in here get the cement truck and seal all fifty feet of this corridor. Then go home."

><br> They nodded and continued their work.

><br> Joe walked out to Ash and Faith and started to tell them about their new home.

><br>\*\*\*\*\*

><br> EPILOGUE

><br> Graduation Day

><br> A lot of changes had come with the disappearance of the Mayor.

><br> For one, by order of the new Principal of Sunnydale High, Rupert Giles, the actual date of Graduation had been put back a day. Some excuse about an eclipse that would ruin the ceremony.

><br> The Gang was in shock over Giles' elevation but with Snyder running out of town with a pair of Federal Marshals behind him, it had sort had been a done thing. Lots of other people had gone with the Mayor: the Police Chief, the Town Council etc. The amount of corruption discovered was unbelievable. By Xander's last check, the

Mayor was being charged with everything from starting both World Wars the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa.

><br> They were all gathered outside the sewer junction now. The concrete that had been poured into the entrance was long dry and the entire area had fallen to bits. Buffy and Angel ,hand in hand just watched the place as the ground shook for a few minutes and the sun blacked out. Seconds later they heard a dull thud from inside the junction. Then nothing else.

><br> They turned and went home.

><br>

> <br>

><br>

End  
file.